

Ordinary Experience as Evidence in Joseph Butler's Moral Theory

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Abstract

Heather Mills: Ordinary Evidence as Experience in Joseph Butler's Moral Theory
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Given Joseph Butler's tripartite view of human psychology, some philosophers argue that he faces three objections: circularity, vacuity and normativity. Sahar Akhtar argues that if we interpret Butler to hold reason and conscience as two different mental capacities, he can answer these objections. Amelie Rorty argues, in contrast, that he can do so while maintaining that reason and conscience are the same mental capacity. I agree with Rorty's conclusion and argue that: 1) Part of the reason the disagreement arises in the secondary literature is due the fact that Butler presents his philosophical position in colloquial English. 2) I conclude that if we take Butler at his word that the evidence of his philosophical position comes from our very experiences of making moral decisions then he does not in fact face the three objections.

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to discuss a disagreement in the secondary literature concerning Butler's notion of conscience and how it pertains to his moral theory. One argument is that conscience, and our ability to reason, amount to the same mental capacity on Butler's view. The second argument is that reason and conscience are different mental capacities. I argue here that reason and conscience are indeed the same mental capacity for Butler. In the last section I offer an explanation of why I believe that this disagreement arises.

These two explanations are offered as ways to answer three types of objections that philosophers raise against Butler's moral theory. Some philosophers argue that if Butler holds conscience and reason to be the same mental capacity, then he faces objections that his explanation of human psychology is 1) circular, 2) vacuous and/or 3) fails to give a clear account of why the judgments of conscience are normative. On this last point, Sahar Akhtar argues that for Butler, reason and conscience are in fact separate mental capacities. This interesting proposal does provide a solution to the three problems I mention above and it does seem to have some textual support. However, upon analysis, I disagree with her interpretation for reasons I will discuss below.

Amelie Rorty, in contrast, argues that reason and conscience are in fact the same mental capacity and Butler can avoid the circularity, vacuity and normativity objections due to the explanation he gives us concerning our own deep psychological structures. I agree with

Rorty's conclusion and the explanation she gives that for Butler, one ought to perform the act that best maintains psychological harmony.

What I add is this: Butler believes that we have good reason to conclude that we are naturally constructed to act morally and he has what he takes to be empirical evidence to back up his philosophical claim. His project when giving the *Sermons* was to convey this philosophical material to an audience of non-academics (though it is a substantial piece of ethical philosophy meant to advance a serious philosophical position and by the time he went on to publish the material, he no doubt knew that philosophers would read the material). In order to convince his audience that they are so constructed to act morally, he often speaks in colloquial language. As proof of his philosophical theory he prompts them—and us—to reference their everyday experiences as proof of his philosophical point. Doing so is the most informative way to convey his particular moral theory, given that he takes his philosophical position to be the conclusion of the empirical findings of our experiences in everyday life. It is here that I argue that is a source of the confusion in the secondary literature. One of Butler's methodological tactics is to walk his audience through situations in which they need to make moral decisions. According to Butler, when one is in a situation in which one must make a moral decision, she does not experience reason and conscience to be different moral capacities. Neither does one experience the circularity, vacuity or normativity problems when actually in the situation of having to decide how to act. For Butler, this is the evidence that proves his philosophical argument. It is for this reason that I argue Rorty is correct. If we lose sight of the "do it yourself" method that Butler uses in order to convince his audience that humans are naturally constructed to act morally, then we may think that Butler faces the objections I cite above and we may disagree on Butler's philosophy of mind.

For the rest of this essay I will argue that the position I hold above is in fact the case. First I will present a clear layout of Butler's moral theory as it relates to his philosophy of mind. Then I will briefly go through Akhtar's argument and highlight what I find to be the major weaknesses. In section IV, I will explain Rorty's argument. Finally, in section V, I will argue that my addition to Rorty's interpretation illustrates that if we lose track of Butler's specific purpose in the *Sermons* and the particular empirical manner which he uses as proof of his philosophy in order to convince his audience that humans are naturally constructed to act morally, we may disagree on our understanding of Butler's human psychological picture.

II. Butler's Moral Theory

This section breaks down into three main subparts. I will give an overall description of Butler's platonic psychological picture. In the second and largest part I will describe and elucidate the three objections—circularity, vacuity and normativity—and explain why they pose a threat to Butler's theory. In the third part I explain how Butler's discussion of fitness in the *Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue* relates to Butler's platonic picture in the *Sermons*. With a picture of Butler's moral theory at hand, we will then be able to move on to the two interpretations I entertain in sections III and IV.

A. Butler's Platonic Psychological Picture

To start, Butler has a teleological picture of human nature in the tradition of the ancient philosophers. That is, he has an idea that humans have a natural end—to be the best humans that they can be. Just as there is an ideal pine tree or an ideal car tire, there is an ideal model of being human. In the Preface to the *Sermons*, Butler explains that we can understand human nature by the analogy of how a watch works. Just as there are component parts to a watch that make it work properly, there are component parts to a human that make a human work properly. We need to keep this in mind when we think of his psychological picture because he thinks that if all of our component parts are properly running—that is, if we are thinking and acting correctly—we will by our very nature be acting virtuously.

In his “Five Lectures on Joseph Butler”¹, John Rawls explains that Butler’s goal is to show us how we are moral creatures endowed to live harmoniously in society, if we listen to our conscience. He states: “Our nature is adapted to virtue, and virtue in turn is those principles and forms of action and conduct which adapt us to our life in society; that is which make us fit to conduct ourselves as members of society concerned as we must be with our own interests and concern for others.”² This, I believe, can help elucidate Butler’s project. Butler provides us with an explanation on the kinds of creatures that we are by giving us a picture of our own psychology. We are the kinds of creatures that live in society and if we only look around, we will see that we are adapted to do so. Butler wants to explain this picture in such a way so as to convince us that our psychology is such that we are constructed to be moral creatures that ideally live harmoniously in society. His explanation is supposed to illustrate how following conscience is in fact acting according to our nature.

Butler holds a platonic picture of human psychology in the sense that there is a tripartite division of psychological parts. At the first level we have particular desires for external things—say, for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, to watch science fiction movies, to go running, that the Boston Red Sox beat the New York Yankees (as well they should). These desires are for specific things and they pull us to pursue their ends without regard to the negative consequences of going after them.

Presiding over these particular desires are two more general motivations. These are what are often taken to be the competing demands of self-love and benevolence. Self-love and benevolence comprise the second level of the three-part hierarchy. Part of what is at

¹ John Rawls, “Five Lectures on Joseph Butler,” in *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

² Rawls, 422.

issue is whether these two principles vie with each other or conflict. Butler believes that this question is answered empirically. What we find is that when we reason about the course of action we ought to take, it is the case that sometimes we find the correct action is motivated by self-love and that at other times it is motivated by benevolence. The course of action we ought to take is highly dependent on the particular circumstance of the situation, along with our motivations and desires.

At the third level is conscience or reason. The second level general motivations and the primary level particular desires for external objects are under the rule of conscience. Conscience is what makes the decision as to what course one ought to take in a given circumstance. As Butler states:

“The mind can take a view of what passes within itself, its propensions, aversions, affection, as respecting such objects and in such degrees and of the several actions consequent thereupon. In this survey it approves of one, disapproves of another, and toward a third is affected in neither of these ways but is quite different.”³

What is clear here is that on Butler’s moral theory, conscience takes in a variety of psychological and given certain facts about a situation decides what course of action one ought to take.

The contention between the two philosophers I discuss in this paper is whether or not reason and conscience are in fact the same mental capacity or if they are different from each other. If we take reason and conscience to be the same mental capacity, then conscience comes in and reasons about the first-order principles in light of the demands of self-love and benevolence. The outcome of this deliberation is supposed to determine the course of action one ought to take. What is at stake in this argument between the two interpretations is the ability to defend Butler against the three objections. If he cannot defend these, it will result in

³ Sermon 1, paragraph 8.

major metaphysical problems for Butler's ethical picture. In order to understand why this is the case, I will discuss the three objections in more detail below.

B. Circularity, Vacuity and Normativity

If we answer to the affirmative that reason and conscience are the same mental capacity, then one can argue that Butler is open to (at least) three kinds of objections. They illustrate weaknesses in his metaphysical and psychological picture. They are:

- i. A circularity problem: Conscience tells us if what we are motivated to do is good or vicious. It tells us that we ought to act on the good action. This judgment is supposed to be a judgment about what is natural. But, what is natural is the action on which conscience decides to act.
- ii. A vacuity problem: There is no substantive content on which conscience can make its decision because it must appeal to the very motivations—self-love and benevolence—on which it is trying to decide. In other words, we must decide whether to take an act for which self-love is the motivation or which benevolence is the motivation. But, it looks as if conscience tells us to do what either self-love or benevolence tells us to do without respect to any other concerns.
- iii. A normativity problem: There is nothing that seems to justify a normative “ought” of the decision of conscience.

First, let us look at the circularity problem. Let us keep in mind that Butler explains how conscience, as the ultimate authority, figures into the psychological picture he presents with what seem to be the competing demands of self-love and benevolence. Butler has an explanation about what it means to act according to one's nature. When we act according to our nature this does not mean that we act out of either self-love or benevolence with conscience determining the most appropriate psychological state on which to act. On Butler's view, the judgment about how one ought to act is a judgment about which act is natural. As Akhtar explains, this point in Butler's view gives rise a to a circularity objection: “we are left with the position that conscience does not approve of any action unless it is natural, yet an act

is natural if it is done in accordance with ones' conscience."⁴ Here the normativity problem connects to the circularity problem: If what makes an action normative, what generates the force of the *ought*, is that it is the particular act that is the most natural to us, but the act that is natural is the one of which conscience approves, then Butler's argument is circular. If we are to respond to the heed of conscience—follow the normative ought—we should act on what our consciences determine is the most virtuous act—that which is makes natural. If we are going to be able to explain Butler's view in a way that is non-circular, we need to find a way to interpret his work in such a way that he avoids the circularity problem, and find a way to do so that also address the normativity problem, else we must admit that Butler makes a mistake in this part of his theory.

Second, let us flesh out the normativity problem a bit. We cannot conclude that one's normative judgment that we have an obligation to conscience is in fact itself a judgment of conscience. Some other endorsement and normativity-generating psychological trait must issue the command to follow the dictates of conscience. In Sermon III, paragraph 2, a paragraph I will return to in Akhtar's section, Butler explains that it is the job of conscience to rule over the lower faculties. In this paragraph Butler's intent is to show us that though we feel the normative force of the judgment of conscience, we do not always take the action that conscience judges we ought to take. We are not our consciences, though we have good reason to listen to it as our moral and normative guide. Butler's point is that we do have conscience in us—the rule of right—and if we want to live well and virtuous lives, we will listen to it. Having a conscience does not at all entail that we do not act on other principles: say on certain desires. Or that we are never mistaken about what is in our self-interest or

⁴ Sahar Akhtar, "Restoring Joseph Butler's Conscience," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 6 (2006): 588, *EBSCOHost* (27 January, 2008).

what is benevolent. Rather, he is explaining explicitly what should be clear to us if we just consider what is apparent in our everyday lives. When we consider certain motives for action, some will be met with approval or disapproval. Our consciences tell us which actions are the right ones, where 'right' is doing what is natural.

The judgment that an action is natural generates a normative claim to follow its dictates because conscience carries with it its own authority. What this means for Butler is that conscience, as a feature of one's psychology, is in part constitutive of one's nature. One is able to weigh and judge different courses of action and determine which is the most natural—that is, what one ought to do. The authority of this judgment—that it is an ought—in part constitutes what makes conscience the very capacity that it is. One experiences its authority but its authority of judgment comes not from one's experience of its authority (a point that I will further discuss in sections IV and V) but that part of what constitutes the capacity we call conscience is that it is authoritative. What gives it its authority is beyond the scope of this paper and it is not an issue that Butler addresses. What he does do is make it clear through his various examples and arguments that nothing external needs to verify the authority of conscience, the capacity that determines what we ought to do. According to Butler, this should be obvious to anyone who honestly thinks about and considers her everyday life and moral experience. The evidence of its authority is in our very experience of feeling conscience's authority when we deliberate on what course of action we ought to take.

The problem, however, is it does not seem that explaining what makes conscience authoritative is beyond the scope of Butler's project. If he is giving us guidelines about what ought to motivate us to act and on what grounds these judgments are authoritative, then he

must explain the demand of conscience's normativity. Akhtar, as we will see, believes that we can explain this by treating reason and conscience as two separate mental capacities. Rorty, in contrast, argues that Butler does not do so, nor that it is necessary that he do so. I believe he does not have to answer the question for the reason I give above—the fact that we experience its authority is evidence that it has authority—and it may be the case that given our epistemic position this is all that we can hope for. Butler, at least, thinks that our experience of its authority is all that we need as evidence to prove his theory that we are naturally constructed so as to act morally. But suffice it to say that there is debate concerning whether or not Butler actually achieves doing so and if he does, how his theory can answer the normativity objection. I will come to this point again in section V.

Important to answering this objection is Butler's discussion of human nature and what it means for one's conscience to have the substantive content needed in order to deliberate which course of action one ought to take. Important to note is that for Butler, acting according to what we think will give us pleasure is not necessarily acting according to our nature. Butler states: "reason, several appetites, passions, and affections, prevailing in different degrees of strength, is not *that* idea or notion of *human nature*; but *that nature* consists in these several principles considered as having a natural respect to each other, in the several passions being naturally subordinate to the one superior principles of reflection or conscience."⁵ In this passage we get a clear description of Butler's teleological picture that illustrates the natural order of our psychological states. However, this philosophical explanation is not how our nature appears to us when we are reasoning. Rather, certain motives and desires pull on us to take one course of action or another and we experience the

⁵ Sermon III, paragraph 2.

pull of conscience telling us which course of action we ought to take. It is experiences such as these that Butler takes as evidence for his philosophical point.

Earlier in the paragraph Butler explains what it means for us to have this disposition to act according to conscience in a way that makes us a law unto ourselves. He states of this capacity that it is:

“[T]hat part of the nature of man, treated in the foregoing discourse, which with very little reflection and of course leads him to society, and by means of which he naturally acts a just and good part in it unless other passions or interest lead him astray. Yet since other passions and regards to private interest, which lead us (though indirectly, yet they lead us) astray, are themselves in a degree equally natural and often most prevalent; and since we have no method of seeing the particular degrees in which one or the other is placed in us by nature, it is plain the former, considered merely as natural, good and right as they are, can no more be a law to us than the latter.”⁶

Butler continues on in the paragraph to explain that the “principle of reflection or conscience”⁷ must come to fore and decide which action we ought to take and which we ought not. At first then it must seem that the judgment of naturalness and that of the normative ought that conscience or reflection makes are distinct.

However, this passage continues with use of the word “natural” in reference to “conscience”. Butler states with respect to the judgment of conscience:

“[It] distinguishes between the internal principles of his heart as well as his external actions, which passes judgment upon himself and them, pronounces determinately some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust, which without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially exerts itself, and approves or condemns him to doer of them accordingly; and which if not forcibly stopped, *naturally* [my italics] and always of course goes on to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence which shall hereafter second and affirm its own.”⁸

⁶ Sermon II, paragraph 8.

⁷ Sermon II, paragraph 8.

⁸ Sermon II, paragraph 8.

Following this section is the sentence “...it is by this faculty, natural to man, that he is a moral agent, that he is a law to himself.”⁹ Here, Butler states that our faculty to decide on which judgment we ought to act is natural to us. Butler’s use of the words “natural” or “naturalness” leads us once again to the circularity problem and so we can see here the interconnectedness of the circularity and normativity objections.

Finally for this section, I elucidate the vacuity objection. Butler needs to explain the substantive content on which reason deliberates in order to decide which action one ought to take. There is a trick though because Butler cannot do so by appeal the lower level faculties especially given that he states: “the constitution of man is broken in upon and violated by the lower faculties or principles within prevailing over that which is in its nature supreme over them all.”¹⁰ What this means is that if any of the lower level faculties takes over the proper role of conscience, or if we act on one of these passions instead of the judgments of conscience, it is a violation of our natural human constitution.

What makes the vacuity objection so problematic is that Butler presents conscience as a formal capacity to reason about what course of action we ought to take. However, it is not clear on what grounds we should base this decision other than making an appeal to both self-love and benevolence where, as stated in section A, conscience tells us to act as self-love and benevolence alone advise. But, then we end up with our vacuity problem because we still have no substantive way in which to decide between acting out of reasonable self-love and/or reasonable benevolence and to what degree we should allot each of these motivations. Additionally, Butler’s position also does not entail that we must weigh each consideration in

⁹ Sermon II, paragraph 8.

¹⁰ Sermon III, paragraph 2.

every particular circumstance. Sometimes we may but often when one makes a decision upon which course of action to take, the decision is immediate. So in attempting to solve the vacuity problem by an appeal to conscience, we end up back at our original problem of having no substantive, nor, for that matter, normative way in which to decide how much weight we give either self-love or benevolence in order to decide how we ought to act. Self-love and benevolence appeal to conscience for guidance, but conscience seems itself to appeal to self-love and benevolence for guidance. This leaves us without any power to substantively produce a moral ‘ought’.

I present below a passage from the *Sermons* that illustrates the ambiguity in Butler’s discussion of the second level motivation—benevolence—and reason/conscience. I do so in order to illustrate why the vacuity problems shows up in the secondary literature. This excerpt is not the only place in which we find troublesome passages, but it does provide a clear illustration of the relation between the second and top level mental ‘tiers’ in Butler’s hierarchical platonic picture.

This is a passage from Sermon XII. I have inserted letters to break the passage into sections that I will consider in turn below. Butler states:

“**[A]** [W]hen benevolence is said to be the sum of virtue, it is not spoke of as a blind propension, but as a principle in reasonable creatures, and so to be directed by their reason; for reason and reflection comes into our notion of a moral agent...**[B]** Reason, considered merely as subservient to benevolence, as assisting to produce the greatest good, will teach us to have particular regard to these relations and circumstances; because it is plainly for the good of the world that they should be regarded. **[C]** And as there are numberless cases in which, notwithstanding appearances, we are not competent judges, whether a particular action will upon the whole do good or harm, reason in the same way will teach us to be cautious how we act in these cases of uncertainty. It will suggest to our consideration which is the safer side, how liable we are to be led wrong by passion and private interest, and what regard is due to laws and the judgment of mankind. **[D]** All these things must come into consideration were it only in order to determine which way of acting is likely to produce the greatest good.

Thus, upon supposition that it were in the strictest sense true, without limitation, that benevolence includes in it all virtues, yet reason must come in as its guide and director in order to attain its own end, the end of benevolence, the greatest public good.”¹¹

This quotation clearly lays a picture of the relation between a second-order desire, various other concerns, and conscience. Though it only addresses benevolence, a similar analogy can be made for self-love. I will consider each section in turn.

Section [A] makes it clear that reason is our guide, not benevolence. That is, the proper authoritative guide for a moral agent is benevolence directed by reason, not distinct from reason. Moreover, it is also the case that in any particular circumstance, self-love may also be motivating us as well, again directed by reason, not distinct from reason.

Benevolence is not necessarily a trump card for determining how we should act. That benevolence does motivate us to act is a fact of our humanity, but it cannot be the sole principle of actions. Conscience, as the guiding mental capacity for reasonable creatures, comes in and determines what course of action one ought to take.

Section [B] is interesting because it is not entirely clear in this passage what has authority over action: reason or benevolence. Butler states here that reason is merely subservient to benevolence. However, he also makes it clear in other passages, some of which appear in the above excerpt, that conscience is the ultimate authority. But, if conscience is subservient to benevolence, it raises the question of what is determining the course of action one ought to take, especially if we consider here the relationship benevolence may have to self-love. Taking Butler’s overall argument into account, in light of what he says in other sections, what I surmise here is that benevolence provides some but not all substantive content for which reason or conscience will issue a judgment about what

¹¹ Sermon XII, paragraph 27.

course of action we ought to take in a given circumstance. That is, reason will tell you how to be reasonably benevolent, and will take several variables of our lives and circumstances into account when deciding how one ought to act. This is the “assistance” it provides to producing the greatest good. This still leaves us to problem figuring out how Butler thinks conscience or reason determines the weight of benevolence and self-love have in influencing a course of action, as Rorty rightly points out. For now, I flag this as a problem in Butler’s theory that I will address later.

Section [C] is informative because it gives us a hint of some places to which reason will appeal when determining how much benevolence should influence our course of action. It is often the case that often we are not entirely certain how to act and thus conscience does not always seem to have a full grasp on its own of all the factors that can and should influence a course of action we ought to take. In this case, conscience will appeal to external standards such as particular laws, or to the judgment of mankind in general. It will also admonish us to play it safe in order to avoid causing more harm than good.

In section [D] Butler makes it clear that the preceding discussion has only to do with situations in which we are considering merely benevolence as the motivation for action. It does not necessarily consider self-love in these situations, though it seems true that in many circumstances, self-love will also be a factor conscience takes into account when making a decision. We may think that self-love or benevolence will in part guide us in an ‘all things considered’ decision. Or we will still want to question whether or not if what seems to be our intuitive disposition—to act on behalf of either benevolence or self-love—will be the ‘natural’ (a notion which I will further discuss in section C below) disposition for us. Butler states in this passage that reason must come in to help show us how benevolence moves us

and in what respect it may move us to act the same way self-love will. How and to what degree either of these second-order motivations influences us is still, as Rorty points out, a point of contention in the secondary literature. Overall, Butler does not think that reasonable self-love and reasonable benevolence will usually conflict; both will lead us to take the same course of action.¹²

From this passage we get a clear layout of how Butler thinks benevolence provides a motivation for action with respect to our deliberative process. It is also clear here that our motivation to act from benevolence comes not from the positive feelings we have from the positive results of acting benevolently. Rather, benevolence, or analogously self-love, provides the motivation to take certain courses of action. Though we may act out of benevolence, we do not and cannot know whether our actions will produce a positive outcome. The positive feelings we have from the favorable outcomes of benevolent acts or from acts out of self-love generally, when we are acting morally and engaging in the deliberative process, will not be the motivation for us to act, or at least not the primary motivation.

It is important to be clear on the reasons why Rorty thinks Butler needs to answer the vacuity problem, especially in light of the above passage. One of the problems Butler is trying to overcome is the objection that many people act “out of conscience” in ways that we find morally abhorrent. People acting “out of conscience” engage in murder, thievery, and moral and religious condemnation. We can easily imagine someone justifying torturing another by appeal to acting out of good conscience to protect one’s own people or humanity at large. Butler realizes that in making conscience autonomous and thus distinct from self-love and benevolence, he runs the risk of this kind of objection. Thus, he needs to find a way

¹² Sermon IV, paragraphs 11-14.

to make sure that self-love is taken to be reasonable and that benevolence acts as a stop-gap in preventing people from using the demands of conscience as an excuse to cause unjustified and unjustifiable harm to others. So Butler's attempt to solve this problem is to introduce an autonomous deliberative capacity we are all familiar with in the common course of our moral lives—conscience—that must somehow be sensitive to the “fellow feeling” those of us with normally developed moral capacities have for other human beings.

There is also a meta-level source of what may be taken to be normative authority. This is a judgment about the “fitness” or “congruence” of an action to an agent. It is this point in Butler's psychological picture that provides much of the material Akhtar needs to argue that reason and conscience are different mental capacities for Butler. This is the focus of the third and next part of this section.

C. Fitness and Harmony

Important to Rorty's argument is how for Butler, a decision about what act is most fit is in essence a decision about which action maintains harmony of one's psychological states. Butler takes virtue to consist in maintaining this harmony and vice in deviating from it. If we are to act according to our nature, we must keep both self-love and benevolence in check. Conscience deliberates in order to determine which actions we ought to take with respect to self-love and benevolence in light of various particular external desires and the content of our own psychology. Whether or not we act on this decision is, of course, a separate matter. However, the substantive component on which conscience deliberates comes from the need to maintain the overall balance of the various levels of our psychology and the need to harmonize them.

The action that maintains this balance is the action that is most fit. So here it is important to get clear what Butler means by “fitness” or “congruence” (I will use the terms interchangeably as Butler does). Doing so will: 1) illustrate that according to Butler, we make judgments about whether or not to hold another person morally responsible for her actions by making judgments about the fitness of the action to the agent and 2) make it clear that for Butler, our reflection on fitness or congruence is not something we experience in our everyday lives, but rather a conclusion that we draw about certain actions from our everyday experiences. Notice here that this kind of judgment of conscience serves two purposes for Butler. It allows us to evaluate whether or not another person is morally blameworthy for her actions and lets us determine what course of action we or any other rational agent ought to take. The aim of this section is not to engage in a lengthy discussion concerning Butler’s views of moral responsibility. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate the colloquial style of Butler as a means to show why it is the case that his particular manner of conveying to his audience his philosophical arguments leads to confusion in the secondary literature over what he takes conscience to be and what powers or abilities it has. I take this here to be a preview of what I will conclude in the final section. The following discussion fleshes out important metaphysical and epistemological problems.

What motivates some of the discussion of an action’s fitness to the nature of the agent as discussed in the secondary literature comes primarily from a passage in Butler’s *Dissertation*. In paragraph 5 Butler discusses the difference in judgment we have toward children and the mentally ill versus fully rational adults when those who lack full rational capacities act in ways that are considered highly inappropriate, or even vicious. Butler explains that: “our perception of vice and ill desert arises from, and is the result of, a

comparison of actions with the nature and capacities of the agent.”¹³ Our moral condemnation of a person’s action is contingent upon the mental and psychological capacities of that person. If one is not capable of responding to or being aware of the demands of conscience and/or the appropriate social norms necessary to live in society, we do not and should not hold these people morally responsible for their actions.

This is where the talk of “fitness” comes in as the way in which we make the distinction between those who should be held morally responsible for their actions and those who should not. Butler explains that:

“Now this difference must arise from somewhat discerned in the nature or capacities of one, which renders the action vicious; and the want of which, in the other, renders the same action innocent or less vicious; and this plainly supposes a comparison, whether reflected upon or not, between the action and capacities of the agent, previous to our determining an action to be vicious. And hence arises a proper application of the epithets “incongruous,” “unsuitable,” “disproportionate,” “unfit” to actions which our moral faculty determines to be vicious.”¹⁴

Moral evaluation of acts presupposes that there are agents with certain moral capacities.

Outcomes of actions may be more or less favorable, but whether or not we hold a particular person responsible for her actions is dependent upon her capacities—whether or not she is a person with the capacities to engage in moral reflection and discernment. Butler’s position on moral blame follows directly from his picture of human psychology. That is, we cannot hold children, the mentally disabled or anyone else who may be in similar circumstances morally responsible for their actions on Butler’s account because moral responsibility depends on the human psychology necessary to choose to act wrongly or rightly.

¹³ *Dissertation*, paragraph 5.

¹⁴ *Dissertation*, paragraph 5.

In the spirit of a folk psychological approach Butler pulls on our intuitions to support his claim. He says:

“every one has a different sense of harm done by an idiot, madman, or child, and by one of mature and common understanding, though the action of both, including the intention, which is part of the action, be the same; as it may be, since idiots and madmen, as well as children, are capable not only of doing mischief, but also of intending it.”¹⁵

The thought is this: if we just reflect on how we place moral blame on other humans, we will easily note that we do not hold the mentally ill or children to the same standard as we do fully rational adults. We can recognize that a madman intends to kill someone or that a child intends to punch someone, but they both lack the moral capacities available to others in conscience. Their psychological state is such that they may not have an emotive response to the thought of purposely taking an action with the intent of causing harm either to themselves or others. Or, and perhaps also, they may lack the capacity for engaging in the deliberative process necessary to weigh and consider various courses of action and outcomes before they do take action. They, essentially, have no conscience (or a limited conscience), and conscience is the basis of normative judgment for our own actions, and our moral evaluations of others.

What I argue is of vital importance here is the fact that Butler takes our own experiences of making the distinction between who should and should not be held morally responsible for her actions as evidence for his philosophical argument concerning moral responsibility. This data for Butler is empirical evidence and is what supports his ethical theory. The fact that Butler’s method of conveying his philosophical point by using our own experiences as evidence to confirm his philosophical argument is important to understanding why I argue that he can overcome the three objections. I will return to this point in section V.

¹⁵ *Dissertation*, paragraph 5.

D. Summary of Chapter Two

As mentioned above, Akhtar argues that Butler's discussion of fitness is strong evidence for the argument that Butler takes reason and conscience to be different mental capacities. Rorty does not. We can see that if Butler does think that they are the same mental capacities, we must contend with the circularity, normativity and vacuity problems. Given the material in the *Dissertation*, *Sermons* and the explanatory power of interpreting Butler to hold reason and conscience as two different and distinct mental capacities, it is understandable that Akhtar interprets him this way. However, as I argue in the next section, this cannot be the case given the evidence to the contrary.

Nonetheless, Butler can still answer the three objections. I argue that given Butler's aim of persuading his audience that they are so constituted to act morally, we better understand his theory if we approach it from the perspective of someone actually following along with him and engaging in his colloquial style. In doing so, we can answer his three objections and in this case, and do so from within the scope and intent of his project. I leave the rest of this argument to section V.

III. Akhtar: Reason and Conscience are Different Mental Capacities for Butler

Akhtar contends that in order for Butler to be able to answer the circularity and normativity objections, we need to interpret his view in such a way that conscience and reason are two different mental capacities. What she argues is that conscience is an immediate, emotive response and reason is a calm, reflective and deliberate response. Thus, conscience properly understood is an instant response we have when we judge whether or not an act is in itself right. Reason, however, is what Butler refers to as reflection in a “cool hour” and, taking various factors into account makes a moral judgment about whether or not we are acting according to our internal principles. Here, internal principles are those which are our nature. To act virtuously is to base one’s actions on the dictates of reason in light of one’s internal principles.

Akhtar concludes that her interpretation answers the normativity problem in this way: Reason makes the meta-judgment of the fitness of an action. This action is what is most natural. This may or may not coincide with the response of conscience. However, the decision that one ought to follow the dictates of conscience is what makes the judgment of conscience normative.

She believes her distinction between reason and conscience also answers the circularity objection. She Akhtar states: “The approval of conscience, or one of the higher principles of self-love or benevolence, is required before an action is natural, but conscience

does not approve an action on grounds of naturalness.”¹⁶ So it is the judgment that an action is natural, that makes the action natural on her view. Reason comes in and decides whether or not that judgment is normative.

In the following sections I will argue that her interpretation of Butler is incorrect.

A. Reason and Conscience Issue Two Different Kinds of Moral Judgment

Let us first look at the judgment of reason. According to Akhtar, this judgment must be one about naturalness—whether or not an action is in accord with our nature and she argues that Butler’s theory does in fact avoid circularity and normativity objections. She cites Butler from the *Sermons* where he states in various places that to be virtuous is to follow one’s nature and vice is deviating from it.¹⁷ She also references a passage in the *Dissertation* in which Butler explains that virtue consists in the fitness of an action to the agent.¹⁸ As stated above, in this section of the *Dissertation* Butler is making clear to us under what conditions we may hold someone responsible for her actions. For example, we do not hold children or the mentally impaired to the same standard as rational adults. Insofar as we are rational adults, however, to act according to our nature, on Akhtar’s interpretation, is to follow the judgment of reason with respect to the fitness of an action to our nature. The act that best fits our nature is one that appropriately meets the demands of self-love and benevolence.

Let us flesh out her point a bit. Akhtar argues that for Butler, a judgment from conscience and a judgment from reason are two different kinds of moral judgments.

¹⁶ Akhtar, 594.

¹⁷ Akhtar, 588.

¹⁸ Akhtar, 588.

According to Akhtar, the main distinction between the two is that conscience judgment is an immediate response that is not a product of a reasoning process. Judgments about naturalness, however, are the product of methodical deliberation and are thus not an immediate response. It is by making this distinction that Akhtar attempts to solve the circularity problem. Our judgment that we should follow the dictates of conscience is a judgment about naturalness: when we act according to the dictates of conscience, we are acting according to our nature and our reason issues this normative judgment.

Akhtar argues that we can think about this in terms of thinking about the difference between judging actions in themselves and judging actions with respect to grounds of naturalness.¹⁹ Let us review an earlier quotation. Here Akhtar is referencing a passage from Sermon II in which Butler states:

“There is a superior principle of reflection or conscience in every man which distinguishes between the internal principles of his heart as well as his external actions, which passes judgment upon himself and them, pronounces determinately some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves, evil, wrong, unjust, which without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially exerts itself, and approves or condemns him, the doer of them accordingly.”²⁰

According to Akhtar, this is a place in which Butler makes it clear that conscience, here referred to as the principle of reflection, does not make judgments about the fitness of an action to us as moral agents, but rather considers the actions simpliciter. She emphasizes here that conscience evaluates actions in themselves. The judgment of conscience is not the product of a reasoning process that generates a normative notion of naturalness. Rather, it

¹⁹ Akhtar, 593.

²⁰ Sermons, II 8

evaluates only what actions are right and wrong and does so without engaging in a reflective process.

Before I address this passage, however, I want first to systematically address the four places Akhtar primarily relies on to argue that Butler thinks conscience is passive. In so doing, I will be able to address the paragraph above and show how Akhtar's interpretation is misguided. Akhtar cites part of this passage in her support for interpreting Butler to hold the view that conscience is passive. It will become clear as I continue, however, that this is not correct.

B. Making the Case that Conscience is Passive and Reason is Active and Normative

Akhtar argues that in the following four passages Butler makes it clear that conscience judgment is immediate and passive.²¹ I will consider each of these in turn:

1. From the Preface, paragraph 13: "regarding the judgment of conscience there are several perceptions *daily felt* and spoken of, which yet it *may not be very easy at first view to explicate*, to *distinguish from all others*, and ascertain exactly what the idea or perception is."²²

Akhtar argues that this passage illustrates the fact that conscience is passive and as she takes it, a mere response to the input of external stimuli. According to Akhtar, a passive judgment is one that is immediate and does not take any mental *action* on our part—they just happen to us. Some present themselves to us whether or not we actively seek them. That is, some action may just strike us as right or wrong whether or not we are trying to determine if this is indeed the case. These kinds of judgments, as mentioned above, are immediate and not the product of a reasoning process or reasoning in a cool hour.

²¹ These are located in the Preface, paragraph 13; Sermon II, paragraphs 8 and 13; Sermon III, paragraph 3.

²² Akhtar, 584.

However, it is not clear how this passage rules out the deliberative process of conscience. While it is true that we have immediate emotive responses to different perceptions, this fact does not entail that this is all of what conscience does. In fact, in this paragraph, Butler contends that we do need to get clear on these reactions we have in order to be at least somewhat certain as to what kind of action we should take in light of them. When making this point, Butler is explaining how various philosophers and moralists in the past have tried to argue that virtue consists in following one's nature. They do so by explaining our reactions to various passions. Butler's mission in this section is to show that they have gone wrong in the past and that part of his project is to make sense of the idea that:

“[t]here seems no ground to doubt but that the generality of mankind have the inward perception expressed so commonly in that manner by the ancient moralists, more than to doubt whether they have those passions; yet it appeared of use to unfold that inward conviction, and lay it open in a more explicit manner than I had seen done; especially when there were not wanting persons who manifestly mistook the whole thing”²³

Butler's point here is not to make some positive argument about the passive nature of conscience, but to show that those who have adopted the ancient arguments for normativity based on naturalness without delving further into how the various psychological aspects of how human beings relate to one another are seriously mistaken. Part of his project is to rectify that mistake. This passage does not illustrate that Butler believes conscience to be passive.

2. From Sermon II paragraph eight: “A superior principle of reflection or conscience...*pronounces determinately* some actions to be in themselves just, right, good...which, *without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially exerts itself*, and approves or condemns him the doer of them accordingly; and which,

²³ *Sermons*, Preface, paragraph 13.

if not forcibly stopped, naturally and always of course goes on to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence."²⁴

This passage is tricky. The words Akhtar drops in the first sentence are: "in every man which distinguishes between the internal principles of his heart as well as his external actions, which passes judgment upon himself."²⁵ In this section, Butler is arguing for the superiority of conscience by appealing to our everyday experience. What we get in the part of the sentence that Akhtar omits is an active description of conscience. In this context, conscience actively evaluates actions and issues some judgment about them after distinguishing between our 'principles of the heart' and the external actions that we take. These 'principles of the heart', as Butler refers to them, are the first-order psychological states that Butler argues aim at external objects, under the two principles and what seem to be competing demands of self-love and benevolence and these in turn are under the ultimate authority of conscience. Conscience comes in to reason about the first-order principles in light of the demands of self-love and benevolence and the actions we may take given their demands. Nothing in this passage indicates that conscience is passive. Rather, we are getting a broader story about how conscience exerts its authority upon the lower psychological states and how it actively does so.

3. This quotation comes from Sermon II, paragraph thirteen: "It will often happen there will be a desire of particular objects in cases where they cannot be obtained without manifest injury to others. Reflection or conscience *comes in, and disapproves* the pursuit of them in these circumstances; but the desire remains. Which is to be obeyed, appetite or refection?"²⁶

²⁴ Akhtar, 584.

²⁵ Sermon II, paragraph 8.

²⁶ Akhtar, 584.

The section is a continuation of Butler's argument that conscience is the superior principle over our psychological states and determines the "ought" of our particular actions. The fact that conscience "comes in" is, according to Akhtar, support for her claim that conscience is passive. However, if we look at the overall argument made in this sermon, we know this cannot be the case. In this particular section, Butler's point is to illustrate that it is absurd to think that particular passions are the authoritative determiner of actions. There is no need for Butler to reiterate in this section that conscience deliberates and reasons because that was the focus of the previous paragraphs in his sermon. Conscience 'coming in' here implies that when conscience considers these various desires, it deliberates on how best to act in light of these passions and issues an evaluation of these passions in light of that determination. Taken out of context of Butler's overall task in this section, conscience may look passive in this particular paragraph. However, an examination of the sermon as a whole reveals its meaning in light of a larger project Butler has to show us that we are so constituted to be moral, via appealing to our own everyday experiences and intuitions. Conscience, though it can be overpowered by particular passions, is the ultimate authority for judging whether or not we ought to act on any particular passion.

4. The last quotation Akhtar cites comes from Sermon III, paragraph 3: "He hath the rule of right *within*; what is wanting is only that he honestly attend to it."²⁷

Akhtar says of this section:

"Butler uses the term 'attend' not to pertain to 'listening' or 'discerning' but rather to 'doing' what is right. This is clear by the preceding sentences in the text where he states that a virtuous person does not *act* at random, but acts in accordance with his judgments. The only thing wanting is that we abide by conscience, not that we discover or reason towards a judgment."²⁸

²⁷ Akhtar, 584.

²⁸ Akhtar, 584.

Akhtar's point is that in this section, it seems clear that Butler is making a distinction between deciding which action we will take, and listening to our conscience. For Akhtar, Butler's point is that the decision making process is one of determining whether or not an action is natural, meaning that it 'fits' with our virtuous nature. Attending here just means listening to the voice of conscience, calling out to one as a witness of approval or disapproval of one's actions. Determining the action's fit with one's nature, however, is a different kind of moral judgment that takes conscience into account, though is not constitutive of conscience.

I do not agree with Akhtar's interpretation of what is going on in the text surrounding her quotation. In paragraph 2 of Sermon III, Butler speaks of human nature consisting of our various passions and psychological states, self-love and benevolence, with conscience ruling over them:

“Every bias, instinct, propension within is a real part of our nature, but not the whole; add to these the superior faculty, *whose office it is to adjust, manage, and preside over them* and take in this its natural superiority, and you complete the idea of human nature.”²⁹

This gives conscience an active role. It is not merely constitutive of a passive response; it takes a judicial and evaluative role in determining how we are to manage our psychological states. Taken with the previous arguments I have made thus far, what becomes clear is that for Butler, conscience is an active capacity that takes into account various psychological states and determines what the appropriate bases for action are in light of the principles of self-love and benevolence.

²⁹ Sermon III, paragraph 2, my emphasis.

C. Back to the Passage in Subsection A

We are now in the position to understand Butler's point in the passage I cite from subsection A. If we take my above discussion in subsection B along with the material from section II we can conclude that in A, all that Butler is explaining to us is that the judgments conscience makes are not judgments about actions simpliciter. Rather he is giving us a description of the phenomenology of the deliberative process. When we consider various ways in which we may act, some will strike us as right and some will strike us as wrong. When we finally decide which action we ought to take, this is conscience exerting its normative authority and this judgment of conscience is a judgment about which course of action is most natural. There are not two separate mental capacities, merely the same one going through the deliberative process.

I do believe that there is some merit to what Akhtar tries to argue, but I am not convinced that it is actually the view Butler held. Let us look at Sermon II, paragraph 9. This is the paragraph immediately following the above quotation in section A. Still speaking about conscience Butler states:

This prerogative, this natural supremacy [Butler's italics] of the faculty which *surveys, approves or disapproves*, [my italics] the several affections of our mind and actions of our lives, being that by which men "are a law to themselves"—their conformity or disobedience to which law of our nature renders their actions, in the highest and most proper sense, natural or unnatural—it is fit it be further explained to you, and I hope it will be so if you will attend to the following reflections.³⁰

Here it is clear that Butler is actually referring to conscience not only with respect to a form of reason or deliberation, but also with respect to a judge of what is natural or unnatural. It is conscience that holds the ultimate authority and is the grounds for judging what acts are natural or unnatural. This point relates to the discussion of fitness in the *Dissertation*. When

³⁰ Sermon II, paragraph 9.

conscience determines which actions based on our psychological states are virtuous in light of the particulars of the circumstance, this is essentially a judgment about whether or not the action is congruous with one as a human being with the capacities of conscience. Fitness in this sense then just means that some action, and the grounds on which we perform it, are congruent with us a rational and social creatures.

D. Summary of Chapter Three

In this section I have entertained a possible response from Akhtar that she argues can answer two of the objections—circularity and normativity. However, as has become clear, it is not the case that Butler believed reason and conscience to be two different mental capacities. Thus, even if taking such an approach will save him from the circularity and normativity objections, they are not true to his theory. Before I advance my own view, however, I will discuss the answer given by Rorty. She does in fact argue that for Butler, reason and conscience are the same mental capacity and that while this is the case, he can still answer all three of the objections discussed in section II. Giving of full picture of her view is the project of my next section.

IV. Rorty and Psychological Harmony in Butler's Ethics

Rorty explains the Butler is able to answer the three objections of vacuity, normativity and circularity due to the explanation he gives us about maintaining harmony with respect to our various psychological states. In the teleological picture, one must be able to have reason rule over the lower level psychological traits. The act that is the product of maintaining the hierarchy is the one that is natural. This section will focus on why Rorty argues that given this psychological picture, Butler is able to answer the three objections.

A. Rorty's Argument

Let us start with a look at the deliberative capacity of conscience and Rorty's explanation of how the three objections arise. According to Rorty, the way in which Butler reigns in the deliberative capacity is by linking it to benevolence. When we deliberate on how we ought to act, we feel that some actions are more appropriate than others. Part of this is because we do have a sense of "fellow feeling" with other human beings. According to Rorty, the problem exists in Butler's theory because of the way, according some philosophers, he structures his argument. Rorty's explanation of this argument can be reconstructed as this:

1. Morality requires rational prudence (reasonable self-love) as well as reasonable benevolence.
2. These can conflict in particular circumstances, and we need a way in which to decide how much weight to assign to each.
3. Butler appeals to our common moral experience of conscience in order to solve this problem.

4. But conscience requires the direction it was meant to provide.³¹

Thus, if conscience is supposed to be what allows us to weigh and decide how to act with respect to self-love and benevolence, but in order to fill in any substantive content to the deliberative process we must, as Rorty contends, appeal to benevolence (and reasonable self-love) we are faced with the circularity, vacuity and normativity problems. The above reconstruction illustrates the vacuity problem as I originally stated in section II, and in the following subsection B we will see how this relates to the circularity and normativity problems.

B. The Three Objections, Psychological Harmony and Fitness

Rorty contends that Butler can, at least for the most part, get out of these problems and maintains that the structure of his psychology still stands. The reason for this has to do with the hierarchical picture Butler has regarding who we are and what “nature” has intended for us. And this has to do with a more general judgment about our overall well being, distinct from a more narrowly construed judgment of self-love. Rorty explains:

“Butler’s Platonic naturalism is introduced to avoid [the judgments of conscience] from being vacuous, to give reflective, rational imperatives substantive content. The substance of the imperatives of conscience is provided by human nature, by the ‘deep structure’ of human motives, which provide not only the explanation but the regulation and justification of the surface structure. The justification of a particular claim of conscience lies in its ability to balance out the claims of various second order dispositions, so that their activities harmonize. It is for this reason that Butler is so confident that self-love, benevolence and conscience are not only compatible, but, at the deepest level, coincident.”³²

So here we get a full picture of what Rorty believes to be Butler’s accomplishment in connecting conscience, reasonable benevolence and reasonable self-love. I take it that part of

³¹Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, “Butler on Benevolence and Conscience,” *Philosophy* 53, no. 204 (1978): 182, *JSTOR*, (27 January 2008).

³²Rorty, 183.

her appeal here is to what Butler believes is human nature, understood as a teleological hierarchy.

Let us delve into the vacuity problem. According to Rorty, the problem is that self-love and benevolence are somewhat vacuous, as explained in section II. We also are not in a position to evaluate which of the first-level desires in which we ought to engage in order to fulfill either or both self-love and benevolence. However, self-love and benevolence are supposed to be our basic motivations for action. On Rorty's account, benevolence is an empathic reaction we have to others that is built-in to us as a motivation for action. It provides no substantive content, nor does it tell us the degree to which we ought to give it priority in guiding our actions in light of reasonable self-love. It also does not guide us in deciding which of the particular desires toward external things we should endorse. So if self-love and benevolence are the source of motivation, it is not clear that they provide any substantive content and are thus vacuous.

According to Rorty, this is the reason Butler introduces and explains the mediating and deliberative role of conscience. Conscience is supposed to be the deliberative process by which we determine how we ought to act. This explanation is supposed to solve our vacuity problem by giving us some sort of substantive content for deciding actions. However, that said about the motivation present in our deliberative process, the substantive content on which conscience deliberates is that of our overall well-being. This judgment is the judgment about fitness, which on Butler's moral theory is the action that is most natural. When conscience deliberates on how one should act it takes into account the various desires and motivations, and given certain facts about our psychology, chooses the one that will maintain the most harmony with respect to our psychology.

Rorty's point here is that according to Butler, in order to maintain this higher-level well being, a psychological harmony that is more encompassing than the general reasonable self-love that most of us have, we must consider the needs of others as well as ourselves and decide which course of action we ought to take in light of such concerns. However, this does not entail that we get a vacuous argument by appealing to these desires as the motivating source of deciding which actions we ought to take. Rather, the point is that conscience judges (often implicitly) what is fitting and this does not necessarily mean that we gratify certain particular passions. Conscience judges that we ought to act so as to benefit others and in so doing, we act in ways that best lead to harmonious living in society. Furthermore, acting benevolently is pleasant to us so given this fact and the fact that doing so leads us to live peacefully in society, being benevolent is more often than not in our self interest. However, as mentioned before, Butler does argue that reasonable self-love and reasonable benevolence will lead us to take the same course of action (most of the time).

Rorty argues that in Butler's moral theory, in order to determine which action we ought to take in any particular situation conscience deliberates and appeals to which action is the best fit for us. This appeal will be to certain facts about the kinds of people that we are—as Rorty calls it, the deep psychological facts about us. The action that is the best fit is that which preserves the harmony of our psychology and with our role as social creatures, thus generating a normative “ought”. Though, as mentioned above, this need not always be an overt process. Conscience can make this judgment implicitly and such an implicit decision is an active process—it is the process of engaging in a mental activity that generates a normative “ought” for us.

C. Motivation for Action in Light of Conscience

As we can recall, one objection mentioned in section II is that an appeal to conscience can be used as an excuse for many people to explain why they engage in abhorrent behaviors. Such an objection can be overcome, however, given the above discussion. One point that Rorty brings up that is a related concern is whether conscience always will decide to do things that will not cause any distress for others. This is not the case.

According to Rorty, the fact that we feel the negative reaction of conscience—guilt—when we harm others and the fact that it is important to have healthy relationships with other human beings is not a full picture of the nature of conscience. We have a natural tendency to promote the overall well-being of others, and sometimes this may mean pushing them to do things or to have feelings they do not necessarily want to have. Our motivation, however, is their welfare. As Rorty says “[t]hat our well-being is promoted by benevolence follows from its being a natural capacity, rather than the other way around.”³³ It is true that we do well when we promote the wellness of others, but this is not our motivation. It is a fact about our constitution as social creatures—an empirical fact. That we feel good when we help others does not undermine the moral significance of what we do or make us psychological egoists. Helping others to do well may mean pushing them to do things that they do not want to do and that do not bring them pleasure, but are in their own interest.

In arguing this point, Rorty references footnote 5 from Sermon I. Though it is arguable that her interpretation does support the conclusion she wants to make about benevolence here, Butler is actually discussing self-love and its relation to the various particular passions. Butler states:

³³ Rorty, 179.

“Consider the appetite of hunger, and the desire of esteem; these being the occasion both of pleasure and pain, the coolest self-love, as well as the appetites and passions themselves, may put us upon making use of the proper methods of obtaining that pleasure, and avoiding that pain; but the feelings themselves, the pain of hunger and shame, and the delight from esteem, are no more self-love than they are anything in the world.”³⁴

The point Butler makes here is this: our motivation to act in the case of self-love is distinct from the feelings we have that are a product of the course of action we take. That we feel pain or pleasure as a result of our deeds is not the motivation for which we act. Butler is anticipating the objection that we may be acting merely out of self-love because our actions bring us pleasure. Quite to the contrary, our feelings are a product of our constitution as beings that feel well or ill given the course of action we take, but they are not the normative source of our actions. They are a product of the actions for which we have motivations.

Let us look at what we have just accomplished with Rorty. According to Rorty, Butler explains that maintaining harmony of our psychological states keeps conscience independent of the lower level psychological attributes and allows one to judge actions as natural and unnatural without appeal to lower level psychological attributes. She argues that it provides a way out of our circularity problem because it fits into Butler’s teleological picture of humanity. Rorty states:

“The substance of the imperatives of conscience is provided by human nature, by the ‘deep structure’ of human motives, which provide not only the explanation but the regulation and justification of the surface structure.”³⁵

According to Rorty, the substantive content to which conscience appeals is the overall relation of an action to our human nature, understood in this teleological picture and this

³⁴ Sermon I, footnote 5.

³⁵ Rorty, 183.

solves are vacuity problem. We do not have a circularity problem because the judgment that conscience makes about what is most natural is that action which is the most fit. This judgment takes into account the psychological picture of the agent as a whole. Finally, understanding Butler this way also gives us an answer to the normativity problem. Regulating and justifying are normative concepts. The ‘deep structure of human motives’ explanation is supposed to answer all three charges: circularity, vacuity and normativity. Maintaining the harmony of human motives regulates the “ought” of our actions and justifies the fact that certain actions “ought” to be done.

D. Concluding Remarks on the Previous Three Sections

There is great merit in what Rorty says in light of Butler’s discussion in the *Dissertation* about the fitness of an action to our nature. I do not disagree with the result of Rorty’s argument, and in the next section I argue for and conclude two main points about Butler’s philosophy and the issues I have discussed in the secondary literature: 1) I will explain why I think that the three objections arise in the secondary literature and why there is disagreement about the nature of conscience in Butler’s philosophy. 2) I will argue that if we actually following along with Butler in his thought experiments and his appeals to our own experiences as evidence of his philosophical theory, there is good reason to think the foregoing disagreements are at least in part due to a mistaken understanding of Butler’s particular method of conveying his ethical position.

Butler has a serious philosophical position as I explained in section II, but the way he finds most appropriate to convey his view is by what he takes to be an empirical appeal to our everyday experiences.³⁶ I take it that much of the confusion over the terminological use

³⁶ *Sermons* Preface, paragraphs 12-13.

of ‘reason’ and ‘conscience’ arises from his colloquial style in writing the lectures. David White explains in *The Works of Bishop Butler*³⁷ that Butler did not write his works for the academy. Rather:

“[T]hey were written either to discharge his duties as a priest in the Church of England or in an attempt to advance his career. Their aim is neither to inform nor persuade but to convert, to convert from the dissolute life, that so often leads to ruin, to the life of virtue and piety, that—and of this is the case he has to make—will bring us the greatest goodness and happiness that is possible for human.”³⁸

He wants to appeal to our intuitions and reference our everyday moral lives as proof of what he argues for in his sermons. As White points out, Butler’s job is to persuade us. Butler’s *Sermons* does not rely on the dictates of God, however. He believed he could convince the atheist that by his very nature, he is suited to act virtuously. His task then in giving his sermons is then to convince us that this is in fact the case. It is at least plausible to argue, then, that he chooses to use our intuitions and experiences as proof of his philosophical point in order to persuade us to act virtuously. As White points out, Butler ordered that his sermons, letters and papers be burned upon his death³⁹ so we may not ever be certain as to the exact reason he delivered his philosophical argument in the exact manner he did. What I offer in the next section, then, is an interpretation of Butler that illustrates why Rorty’s analysis of him is correct. I assume that Butler thought the way to prove to and convince his audience of his philosophical point, perhaps given the fact that at least some were not were not philosophers (though it seems clear from White’s explanation above that he meant his writings to persuade philosophers as well), is to prompt them for empirical proof of his moral

³⁷ David E. White, *The Works of Bishop Butler* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006).

³⁸ White, 4.

³⁹ White, 4.

theory. In the next section I argue that this is in fact the case and illustrate how Butler can reply to Akthar's interpretation of his philosophy of mind and answer the three objections discussed above.

V. Everyday Experience as Evidence for Butler's Ethical Theory

In this section I want to suggest that the main source, if not *the* source, of disagreement in the secondary literature over the nature of conscience and reason is due to the fact that Butler delivered his ethical positions using colloquial language. In order to understand Butler's philosophical position concerning our nature as ethical creatures, we must follow along in his examples with him as members of his audience who, along with Butler, take their common experiences as evidence in support of Butler's ethical theory. We must think in terms of commonly shared language and experiences, call these to mind when we read his text, and use these as the measure of his position. If we step back and analyze instead of follow along and do the thought experiments with him, we then fail to appreciate what he offers us. What he references are the very experiences of making moral decisions, our very act of deliberation and the phenomenology of that experience as proof of his philosophical argument. In this section I will lay out textual evidence that supports the claims I make here and illustrate how, if we engage in moral deliberation and use our experiences as the standard to which we judge the accurateness of Butler's ethical theory, then we find that he is able to answer the normativity, circularity and vacuity objections from within the context of his method for conveying his philosophical position.

A. The Source of the Disagreements

I take the source of the problem between the two kinds of interpretations discussed above to arise from a misunderstanding due to particular empirical way Butler decided to

convince his audience of his philosophical point. He is appealing to our everyday experience and in doing so, he often seems to be playing fast and loose with words because he assumes that we all know what he is referencing when he speaks. One good example comes from Sermon II in which he states:

“Yet we understand one another when we speak of the shape of a human body; so likewise we do when we speak of the heart and inward principles, how far soever the standard is from being exact or precisely fixed. There is therefore ground for an attempt of showing men to themselves, of showing them what course of life and behavior their real nature points out and would lead them to.”⁴⁰

Butler’s objective in the *Sermons* and even to a large extent in the *Dissertation* is to have us examine our own experiences as evidence that by our very nature we are creatures meant to be virtuous.

He also admits in that statement that we all know the kinds of experiences he is referencing “how far soever the standard is from being exact and precisely fixed” meaning that while we may argue about exactly what certain ethical concepts mean, we do in our everyday lives have an understanding of how they work. When we must make moral decisions we do experience the pull of certain moral demands on us and these are the kinds of experiences to which Butler points as evidence that we all understand the psychological picture he presents to us. He admits that there is some ambiguity in the words, but this ambiguity does not undermine the fact that we all understand moral discourse and the types of experiences that require moral deliberation. Furthermore, he does contend that we all know what terms, such as “conscience” mean in general dialogue. In any case, the experiences to which he refers are the evidence he needs to prove his philosophical position, not an analytic argument about the meanings of certain words.

⁴⁰ Sermon II, paragraph 1.

Interpreting Butler's project in this way can help us understand the source of confusion in the secondary literature over the role and relation between reason and conscience. When Butler refers to the feelings of guilt as a result of our conscience or going back and reflecting in cool hour in one's conscience about which course of action one ought to take, he is not out to make a strict metaphysical argument or to debate about the finer points of philosophy of mind, as would be understood in the 18th century. Rather, he is inviting us to reflect upon our own experiences and our own colloquial use of the word "conscience" as proof of what he is explaining to us—that we are so constructed to act morally. In everyday life, we *do* feel regret or happiness, take these feelings into account when we deliberate, and feel the authoritative judgment of conscience.

One helpful way to think about the issue is this: conscience and reason are the same mental capacity, but it performs more than one function as we experience it in our everyday lives. Our immediate response to an event, say a feeling of guilt, is the result of conscience. We can think of this as conscience considered as an emotive response but it is active as well—not passive as Akhtar thinks of it. This emotive response is still a mental action in that though we feel guilt we also make the mental judgment that what we did was wrong—this is why we feel guilty. Though immediate, these kinds of responses, on Butler's view, are all activities of conscience and this is how we experience them. But this kind of response to a course of action is not wholly constitutive of the functions conscience performs. We also reflect on what the right course of action may be in a given circumstance, take our desires toward external objects into account and weigh the demands of self-love and benevolence. This is conscience considered as one's deliberative process which, of course, is active as

well. It is just a different mental function than an immediate response though it is a product of the same mental capacity that also issues immediate responses.

We can think of an analogous case for other body parts—for example, legs. They crawl, walk, run and kick in water to help us swim. The fact that they engage in more than one function does not mean that we have a separate set of legs for each of the above activities. Conceptually, crawling, walking, running and kicking are all different activities, though they are performed by the same set of legs. For conscience, we can conceptually differentiate having an immediate response from engaging in deliberative thought. However, from our own experience, we do not conclude that there is more than one mental capacity, just one capacity that engages in more than one function. To Butler, this should be entirely evident to us if we simply reflect on our everyday lives and think about the nature of our psychology. He is appealing to very common experiences as evidence of his philosophical argument. Now, one may object that she does not share these kinds of experiences, but the point is that Butler appeals to everyday common sense knowledge in order to convince us that we are suited by our very nature to be virtuous. This moral understanding that is the object of his sermons should be available to every rational adult.

I do not take my view to be at odds with Rorty's, but rather an extension of it. My argument is that the interpretation I give above follows from the hierarchical picture understood as our psychology as we experience it. This interpretation will help answer the objections that I will re-entertain next. A proper understanding of Butler's way of presenting his philosophical position and the role of 'fitness' to Butler's psychological story enables us to explain why Butler does not face the three objections: circularity, vacuity and normativity. In order to understand why this is the case, we must approach Butler from the perspective of

his particular method of convincing us of his philosophical position given that his aim is to convince an audience that they are by their very nature moral creatures. His project is to appeal to the everyday experiences of the average person and in doing so he provides a kind of everyday common sense moral theory. Arguing that this is in fact the case is the focus of my next section.

B. A Return to the Problems

As we can recall, the vacuity problem emerges with a discussion of the second level motives—benevolence and self-love. Rorty explains that they are general motives toward no particular object. That is, unlike first level passions that are directed toward particular external objects, self-love and benevolence, though organizationally superior to the first level motives, are not directed to any particular end other than one's personal general good or to the general good of others, respectively. Rorty's discussion of the vacuity problem centers on her discussion of benevolence, but it holds for self-love as well.

Butler establishes that we have the formal capacity to engage in the kind of reflective judgment necessary to make an objective evaluation about which course of action we ought to take.⁴¹ However, this does not determine the content upon which we make a judgment. Self-love and benevolence, being autonomous and therefore distinct from conscience need conscience to direct them. Acting in light of reasonable self-love or reasonable benevolence means that neither of them gets free reign but instead are controlled via conscience. Conscience ideally constrains benevolence and self-love so that neither one becomes too dominate and undermines the well-being of the agent and community. This does not mean that conscience is always successful in doing so-often we act in ways that are not in our best

⁴¹ Rorty, 181.

interest. Nonetheless, as Butler points out when he appeals to our everyday experience, when we do violate reasonable self-love and/or benevolence, we know it and we feel the twinge of conscience for doing so.

Thus, on their own, self-love and benevolence do not determine what course of action we ought to take. It is for this reason that Butler appealed to our everyday experiences of conscience in order to explain how we determine on which motive we ought to act in light of various other considerations pertinent to a given situation. In order to support this claim, I would like to highlight a thought experiment Butler presents to us in Sermon I, paragraph 8:

“Suppose a man to relieve an innocent person in great distress, suppose the same man afterwards, in the fury of anger, to do the greatest mischief to a person who had given to just cause of offense; to aggravate the injury, add the circumstances of the former friendship and obligation from the injured person, let the man who is supposed to have done these two different actions coolly reflect upon them afterwards, without regard to their consequences to himself; to assert that any common man would be affected in the same way toward these different actions, that he would make no distinction between them, but approve or disapprove them equally, is too glaring a falsity to need being confuted. There is therefore this principle of reflection or conscience in mankind.”⁴²

This is a prime example of Butler’s style. He will walk you through an experience or have you call one up yourself as proof of his theory. The example he offers here is proof of the authority of conscience. Take any experience that requires moral deliberation, in this case deciding if one acted morally. When you do so, you experience the authority of conscience either immediately or through deliberation and that experience of its authority in deciding whether or not the actions above were ethical is evidence of its normative force. For Butler, this actual experience in one’s phenomenology is all he thinks he needs to get normativity. While this explanation is congruent with Rorty’s explanation of maintaining harmony of psychological states, what I want to make clear is that it is the experience that Butler points

⁴² Sermon I, paragraph 8.

to as proof of his point. If we lose sight of the fact that for Butler, the experiences we have are the evidence he uses to prove his philosophical position, we may start to think that he does not provide answers to the three objections, or even that he takes reason and conscience to be two different mental capacities.

Let us return again to the relationship between self-love and benevolence. In most cases Butler does not think there to be any real conflict between self-love and benevolence, only apparent conflict, especially in light of the fact that when conscience makes a decision about what course of action one ought to take, the judgment, as explained in section II, subsection A, is not wholly constitutive of taking in the demands of self-love and benevolence and deciding from that what course of action one ought to take. I will set aside this concern for now. Rorty argues, and I agree, that Butler avoids vacuity in his platonic structure, as I stated in section IV. What I want to add here is an explanation of why he thinks this to be the case and why we may often get confused about Butler's picture of human psychology when we think about the role of conscience in Butler's theory.

One of the main reasons Akhtar thinks that reason and conscience must be understood as separate capacities in Butler's view is due to Butler's discussion of congruence or fitness in his *Dissertation*. By way of review, on the hierarchical picture of human psychology, as Rorty points out, we avoid vacuity because the content of conscience reflection and the judgment of fitness come from the deep psychological features of us as human beings with the capacity to engage in moral reasoning and judgment. These judgments of conscience are justified when they best fit the facts about us. This congruence between judgments and facts about us is due to a correct judgment about the relations between a certain course of action, the psychological facts about the agent and her place as a member of society. It is available to

us not only for issuing judgment about the moral responsibility of another but in assessing our own course of action. We, when using our conscience to deliberate, can determine whether or not a certain course of action best fits with what we know about ourselves in the relation between our own selves, our place in society, and the particulars of a given circumstance in which we are making a decision about how we ought to act.

Here is where Butler's general appeal to our everyday experience comes in. It is not the case that the fact of our hierarchical psychological structure is what justifies what actions we take. Butler's methodology is empirical. In sermon 1, paragraphs 1-8, Butler makes what he takes to be an empirical survey of the ways we live and operate in the course of our daily lives. He says of this in paragraph 9:

“From this comparison of benevolence and self-love, of our public and private affections, of the course of life they lead to, and of the principle of reflection or conscience as respecting each of them, is it 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.”⁴³

When we reflect on our own moral lives and the lives of others, we find that we have particular desires that are aimed at certain external objects. Prudence and a concern for others restrains us but what keeps us from not letting either one of these become dominant and self-undermining is the fact that our consciences take in the facts of the entire situation, including the demands of our second level general motives, and from this determines whether a course of action is either the best advised or ill advised. For Butler, this is all empirical in that he points to our experiences of feeling the pull of both self-love and benevolence as evidence to support his argument. The fact that both of the second-level psychological traits and the desires for certain particular objects pull us to act in various ways given various facts about the circumstances in which we make a decision is evidence that they do enter our deliberative

⁴³ Sermon 1, paragraph 9.

process. They are a kind of input on which reason or conscience deliberates and issues a judgment that will allow us to avoid doing wrong if we follow its dictates. I want to offer a contemporary example that illustrates Butler's empiricism.

Think of being back in high school and taking Calculus (for those of you who were not subjected to this truly awful experience, I invite you to instead envision one of the worst experiences you have ever had in school and substitute that one in for the purposes of this example). You come to question number three in an exam and for the life of you, you have not the foggiest idea of how you are going to even begin the problem. The person sitting kitty-corner from you, however, seems to be working hard away at number three. Your first inclination is to see what she is writing, but all of the sudden you feel a pang of guilt. That is conscience. For Butler, this is evidence of conscience telling you right away that what you are about to do is wrong. Say, however, you do not quickly heed the advice. Instead, you deliberate: "Well, I *do* feel guilty cheating off of someone and using her in that way. And, Mr. Swenson will probably also catch me which will get me sent to Honor Board and face a number of unfavorable consequences. I also just feel that I really should not do this." You may deliberate on these issues for awhile, or perhaps only briefly. This is conscience engaging in reasonable deliberation about the pull of self-love—wanting to do well on the test—and benevolence—knowing that you should not cheat and use the work of another to benefit yourself along with the particular desire to get problem number three correct. For Butler, this kind of example is all the proof he needs to show that we do in fact have the kind of hierarchical psychology that he argues we do from the evidence of our very experiences of it. To someone who says to Butler that there is no real proof of the kind of psychological structure he says we do, we can reply by saying this: Examine your own life. What do you

experience? There you have it. The evidence for the position presented is that you experience your moral lives in just this way. All that Butler is trying to do is help clarify what you already know in order to convince you that you are in fact naturally constructed to act morally. The fact that we experience conscience working in us in these ways, in light of the situations we encounter in the world, is all the proof that he thinks he needs to prove his philosophical theory and convince us that we are naturally constituted to make and act on correct moral decisions where the correct action is the one that is most fit.

The fact that Butler uses conscience in these ways—both in reference to an immediate pang of guilt, or of approval and in reference to cool calm reflection about what we should do does not necessarily pose a problem for Butler. Butler's idea is that he can make these claims because it is evident in our everyday experience. What he does is take our very experiences and shows us how they can give us a picture of our own psychological structure. In doing so he illustrates how in fact we are our own normative sources of action as evidenced by the experience of the normative force of conscience.

The phenomenological and everyday experiences of being in situations and making moral decisions in light of the various psychological and factual inputs provide the evidence of the hierarchy of our psychology. What justifies an action is maintaining the harmony of our psychological states in light of the circumstances of the situation and the fact that we are members of society. We have knowledge of the relationship of the lower level desires all the way through our judgments of fitness just by examining our own lives and appealing to our own intuitions. Butler uses the words such as "conscience" in the way he does because he is appealing to the common person's experiences as evidence for his position. He is showing us

that we all have access to the moral knowledge that philosophers and theologians debate and write about, if we only examine our everyday lives.

Let us expand a bit on the answer to the normativity objection. The fact that we experience the judgments of conscience as normative is not what makes them normative. Rather, our experience that the judgments of conscience are normative is evidence for conscience's normativity and authority. Butler thinks that this experience lets us know that conscience issues a normative ought; but the justification for the normative ought does not and cannot have its source in our experience of it. Some may find this kind of explanation unsatisfying. As Stephen Darwall points out in discussing Butler with respect to his responding to Hobbes in the *Sermons*:

“For Butler, the problem with Hobbes’s theory of human nature was that it left out of account our capacity for determining our conduct by ethical and value *judgments*; that is, by a faculty that we implicitly regard as morally authoritative independent of its strength as a motive. Butler’s point was that the *authority* of conscience, an ethical notion, is irreducible to any fact, regarding how it *actually* functions as a motive; for example, it’s psychological strength.”⁴⁴

Some find this problematic because we want to know what makes judgments of conscience normative. It seems that if our very experiences of normativity cannot make them normative nor can we reduce them to any fact and get normativity in that way, we wonder what justifies the judgments and makes it such that we ought to act on the judgment that conscience makes. At this point Butler is not able to answer this question and to a certain extent his theory does seem fall short here.

The problem in this context seems to be that there is a difference between the sentiment or understanding of the dictates of conscience and trusting its force. It is not clear that Butler fully explains why we should trust its force. What is open to Butler, given what he

⁴⁴ Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons Preached at the Rolls chapel and A Dissertation Upon the Nature of Virtue*, ed. Stephen Darwall (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 4.

says in the *Sermons*, is to point to (what he argues to be) the fact that when we do follow the dictates of conscience, we live better lives, maintain psychological harmony and harmony with our place as members of society. This may be enough proof for Butler to say we have good evidence to trust the normative force of conscience in that the maintenance of harmony is normative for us given certain facts about who we are and the circumstances of our lives as social creatures.

With this in mind, let us see if we can allay Akhtar's worries. The facts our of psychology as we engage in moral deliberation in our everyday lives, plus the way conscience works in each rational adult both considered as an immediate response to a considered course of action and considered as engaging in reflective deliberation is evidence for the fact that we are the kinds of creatures that are capable of engaging in this kind of moral deliberation. Given the explanation above concerning why we should trust the feeling of the normative authority of conscience, we can say that not only is Butler in a position to makes a factual claim about how we deliberate and act, but also a normative claim that we ought to do so. Analogously, the very fact that we experience the normative force of the judgments of conscience is evidence for the fact that the dictates of conscience are normative, but our experiences of its normativity are not what make them normative. Conscience's judgments about the fitness of any particular action, either for oneself or for another, carries with it its own authority—as explained in section II. This is not circular—it is a description of what we experience in our own lives.

We are now prepared to handle the circularity objection and its relation to the normativity objection. When we deliberate on what course of action we ought to take, we feel the pull of both general benevolence and self-love. In the course of our reasoning they

provide one kind of input (among others) on which conscience weighs various courses of action such as my need to make sure that I take care of my own health, or that I should be more concerned at this time for the health of one of my friends who is not eating well because she is stressed. They are not vacuous, but provide much-needed information for conscience to take into consideration. According to Butler, this is how we experience the pull of self-love and benevolence. If you do not believe, go try it, that is his evidence. Now when conscience finally does decide, the decision is the one that is best fit-or in this case, most natural. This judgment about which action is the most natural is, according to Butler, the one that maintains the psychological harmony, but this judgment is made from our very experiences—from the phenomenology of having to make that decision. What is different here is not that conscience makes its judgment in this way, but that the evidence that this is so is in our everyday experiences. Butler is trying to convince us that the action that is most natural to us is the one that is the most moral. On this interpretation of Butler, the circularity, vacuity and normativity objections do not arise because they do not show up in the actual experiences of our making these kinds of judgments in our everyday lives. I argue there that we may see these problems because we fail to follow Butler along in his thought experiments and experience the way in which our inner psychology leads us to be moral.

Assuming that this is in fact the case for the sake of argument⁴⁵, one may wonder if the fact that I do not see these problems is only because I am not in the position to see them. That is, these three problems do really exist but my epistemic state is such that I do not see them. Given Butler's argument, I do not believe that he thinks they actually are problems if

⁴⁵ I leave it open whether or not someone will see these problems if she does in fact engage in the process as I outline above. I, personally, do not and I do not believe Butler thought we would see them either. If in fact it is the case that all or any of these three problems do emerge even in one's very experience of engaging in deliberation, then I take this to be a problem for Butler. Admitting that, however, I want to set this problem aside for now as one that I can investigate at a later time.

one does not in fact encounter them in one's experiences of making moral decisions about what action one ought to take. In fact, this is the kind of line I have been trying to push throughout this section. If we accept that we do not in fact encounter in our very experiences the three problems raised as objections to his argument, then according to this reading of Butler, they are not genuine problems.

C. Two Problems to Highlight

I take it that by this point, we realize that if we are to prove Butler wrong from within the framework of his discourse, we must provide evidence that undermines what he takes to be evidence—our everyday experiences—that we are naturally constituted to act morally. Thus, what we may still want to debate is whether or not we actually do experience our psychological process in this way. I take this as a fair and open question for Butler (see footnote 44 above). For, he will leave it to empirical evidence—people's experiences of making moral decisions in their everyday moral lives—as proof one way or the other. He argues that the evidence at hand stands in his favor. But, of course, this could be wrong.

Second, there is a further question as to what makes the judgments of conscience normative on a deeper metaphysical level. This issue also appears to raise many questions and produce many pages of argument in the secondary literature. I touched on this question above on page 45. Given Butler's aim to prove to us that we are so constituted to be moral and his methodology of using the experiences of our everyday lives as evidence of his position, however, he does not seem to be out to answer the deeper metaphysical question nor does it appear, as I argue above, that he thinks we can answer this question. Nonetheless we can also conclude for Butler that we find that when we follow the dictates of conscience, it allows us to function well as the kinds of beings that live in complex societies. It makes

sense of our hierarchy of psychological states in that our experiences are evidence that when we heed the advice of conscience, we do in fact live well, especially given the fact that we are the kinds of creatures that live in society. Now, this is not meant to be an argument that Butler is pointing to utilitarian or pragmatic arguments in order to justify or explain why the judgments of conscience are normative. Rather, this is further evidence for how conscience operates and perhaps offers a further explanation about how human psychology gives rise to certain social norms. If we are still looking for some sort of deeper metaphysical explanation or, perhaps, justification, it is not evident that Butler could give us one, nor is his task to do so.

VI. Conclusion

Butler's method of appealing to our everyday experiences as proof of his philosophical position is arguably open to epistemic objections. But rather than dismiss his project as misguided it is more insightful to understand both the aim of his project and his intended audience. Butler's project is to convince us that we are so constituted by our very nature to act morally and does so by appeal to the everyday experiences to which we can all relate. He wants to motivate us to act morally where to do so means to follow the dictates of conscience. As I argue above, the circularity, vacuity and normativity problems that some philosophers argue are present in his theory arise because they fail to take into account Butler's particular methodology. It also explains why there may be disagreement concerning the nature of reason and conscience for Butler. One may object that such a methodology has many flaws and no doubt this is true. My project here has been to approach Butler from within his methodological framework. In doing so, we find that he can answer the three objections I entertain above, if we allow him to do so on his own terms.

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