

ESSAY

Medicine as charity: Bishop Butler on cheerful giving

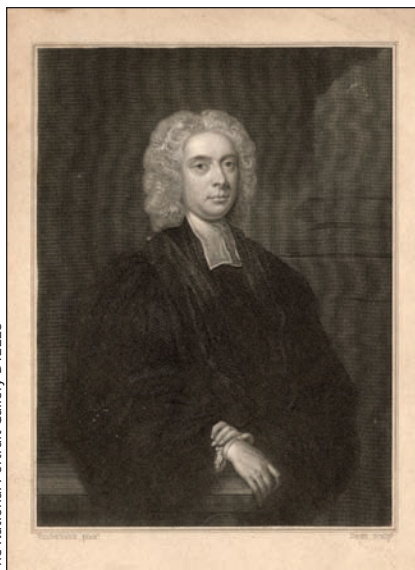
There is really nothing remarkable in an 18th-century Bishop preaching about charity to the governors of the London Infirmary, a hospital “for the relief of sick and diseased persons, especially manufacturers and seamen in merchant service, their wives and children.” Nor is it surprising that the infirmary’s president, his Grace Charles, Duke of Richmond, was in attendance.

That the Bishop’s sermon should still be in print and worthy of discussion 262 years later, however, is rather unusual. But then, Bishop Joseph Butler, who preached it on Mar. 31, 1748, was more than just a high-ranking Anglican clergyman. Though not the most famous philosopher of his day, he was one of the best of them. Butler’s major work, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, is still read, discussed, and in print two-and-a-half centuries after his death, as are several collections of his subtle, philosophical sermons, including the one on charity that is my subject.

Exactly why Butler, who became the Bishop of Bristol in 1738, was invited to address the governors of the infirmary is no longer known, but the situation into which he and his sermon entered is one familiar to hospitals of every time and place: deteriorating facilities and increasing patient load, leading to an imperative to move to larger premises, which was deferred because of the difficulty in raising funds. Much about medicine has changed since that sermon, but not these conditions, to which it is partly addressed.

The title of the sermon is also typical of the day in the length of its title: *A Sermon Preached before His Grace Charles Duke of Richmond, Lenox, and Aubigny, President; and the Governors of the London Infirmary, for the Relief of Sick and Diseased Persons, especially Manufacturers, and Seamen in Merchant-Service, &c. at the Parish-Church of St. Lawrence-Jewry.*

However a deeper pertinence



The National Portrait Gallery D12228

Bishop Joseph Butler’s sermon on the meaning of charity holds lessons that have endured. This early 19th-century stipple engraving of Butler was probably by Thomas Anthony Dean; after John Vanderbank.

breathes through Butler’s words, deriving not from the perennial problems surrounding the supply and delivery of medical services, but from Butler’s unusually deep grasp of the idea of *charity* and its connection with medicine in the economy of human life.

Medicine, for Butler, is a “public” concern. He means that everyone sick enough to require medical attention ought to receive it, regardless of his or her ability to pay. Those in favour of universal accessibility might casually agree, imagining Butler to be an enlightened soul, looking forward presciently to the system of socialized medicine common in the West today. Such self-congratulation would be premature, however.

Not that Butler would object to the state’s taking responsibility for meeting the medical needs of the suffering poor. He no doubt had enough experience of government to know that its tax revenues are seldom so well spent. But that was not the point he wished to make.

Medicine, as Butler saw it, was essentially based on the Christian notion

of charity and on the demand it makes on all people as individuals. “It would be a sad presage of the decay of these [medical] charities,” he tells his listeners, “if ever they should cease to be professedly carried on in the fear of God, and upon the principles of religion.”

Why would it be a sad day? Because at the periphery of any nominally universal system, including our own, there are always problems and procedures that are not covered by it and marginal people (non-citizens, for example) who are ineligible. There will always be people, then, whose medical needs can only be met at private expense. They are Butler’s subject. They are the ones whom only charity can help.

Contemporary libertarians, if they could somehow have overheard Butler, would have denied that any such obligation of charity, as he understands it, can exist. And the argument upon which they rest their case is a forceful one: If you have a financial obligation to the poor, libertarians say, then the poor must have a corresponding *right* to some portion of your worldly possessions. But if they had such a right, it would involve the absurd notion that property could simultaneously be yours by possession and theirs by right. Therefore no such obligation exists.

You might think Butler fortunate that in his day he did not have to face formidable opponents such as libertarians. But that would be to underestimate Butler, who was by no means backward in argument. Had there been libertarians to lay that objection before him in 1748 he would certainly have acknowledged its cogency. No one can grant its premises and yet deny its conclusion. However Butler would have questioned the premises.

If charitable obligation were a simple relation between rich and poor, then we would all be driven by logic to the libertarian side. But that line of reasoning omits to consider the most important party involved in all genuine acts of charity. In addition to the transaction that must occur between haves and have-

nots, about which the libertarians reason so flawlessly, there is also the relation between the haves and God, about which they are silent. It is as if they explained sailing as a relation between boats and ports, but forgot to mention the sea.

The argument looks different when the concept of God is introduced. If it is correct to assume that God is the giver of everything, not only of goods, but of life itself, then he cannot be repaid, let alone placed in our debt. If we are assumed to be God's creatures, we have an obligation to him that we can in no way discharge. According to Butler's reasoning, the interest on our debt is the most we could repay, but the only currency in the transaction is obedience. He was then able to conclude that what God requires of obedient persons is that they exercise charity toward their neighbours. Thus, contrary to

what the libertarian believes, we do have an obligation of charity, deriving from our dependency on God, together with his command of love. "By fervent charity," Butler writes,

"with a course of beneficence proceeding from it, a person may make amends for the good he has blamably omitted, and the injuries he has done, so far as that ... his charity should be allowed to cover the multitude of his sins."

Hats off to an 18th-century bishop who can so easily rescue an "obligation of charity" from the objection of 21st-century libertarians. With the same implacable lucidity Butler lays out what charitable obligation amounts to, why it is always personal, rather than collective, why these obligations should be as great, rather than as little as we can afford, and several other

uncomfortable truths that there is not space to discuss here in detail.

Clever people will no doubt notice that they can evade Butler's heavy demands by denying the existence of God. That is true. But then, if they are consistent, they will also have to give up their dreams of a compassionate society. It's hard to know what clever people do then. Will they perhaps give up consistency?

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POETRY

Wardrobe

The man in the next bed vomited
Red, then his monitor danced.
He called me lucky, a name I wear
On my finger, like a lead, to check myself.

My daughters never visit. I want them
To rest their hands on my head;
I look for "dad" like a scarf
I haven't felt in years.

The resident complains about me,
The end-stage pancreas in room 2;
Medical students call me Sir
So they can poke and percuss.

I wear the name "patient,"
Like another paper gown; sensible
But thin and far too sterile,
The smell lingers on me, foreign.

Soon my wife will come with a name,
To take me home, draped
In her soft "dear;" my favourite
Sturdy, old coat.

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