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# Samuel Butler:

## A Horror of Being Trapped

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### *Preface*

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the source and development of the satirist's disillusion with the evils of his age, especially with family, religion and education, and the creation of a series of positive values. In order to meet this purpose, I would like to refer to his biography from 1860 to 1886, his note-books and *The Way of All Flesh* as well as *Erewhon*, because Butler was conditioned to seeing his peculiar kind of household as typical of that of his contemporaries. His association was essentially with the old bourgeoisie of the liberal professions to which he belonged, and not with the new bourgeoisie of trade and industry born from the Industrial Revolution. His class had enjoyed rank and privilege in the eighteenth century and had come through the Industrial Revolution almost unchanged, with a lively sense of its own gentility and a steady allegiance to the Church of England as the church to which all really decent people belonged, as contrasted to the vulgarity of many of the newly rich bourgeoisie. His satire was produced and developed in this soil. The second reason why I refer to these sources is that almost all his works were written from 1860 when he was striving most earnestly against his home and especially against his father—typical of the old bourgeoisie—to 1886 when his father died. His critical comments on Charles Darwin's new theory were contributed to the *Press* in New Zealand from 1860 to 1864, and combined into four books from 1877 to 1886. The writing of

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*Erewhon* began with the article, *Darwin among the Machines*, that Butler published in New Zealand in 1863; *The World of the Unborn* was written in or about 1865; and then came, almost immediately, the first sketch of *The Musical Banks* and of the trial of a man for being in consumption. *The Way of All Flesh* was begun in 1872. He acquired much intellectual advice from Miss E. M. Ann Savage from 1870 to 1885.

### Chapter 1. Family

Semuel Butler suffered a lifelong horror of being trapped. This obsession was the main cause of his disillusion and urged him to strive for the free activity of his own will. Fundamentally, the most forceful captor was his father whom he satirized as the general type of the old bourgeoisie in the Victorian Age. According to Butler's *Note-Books*, he seems to have looked upon his father as an unkind, unjust, will-shaking power and the worst enemy of all who trapped and tried to thwart him. Canon Butler (his father) could not put himself in the position of his son and try to appreciate his aims or efforts with sympathy.

He never liked me, nor I him; from my earliest recollections I can call to mind no time when I did not fear him and dislike him; over and over again I have relented towards him and said to myself that he was a good fellow after all; but I had hardly done so when he would go for me in some way or other which soured me again. I have no doubt I have made myself very disagreeable; . . . There can be no real peace and contentment for me until either he or I are where the wicked cease from troubling. An unkind fate never threw two men together who were more naturally uncongenial than my father and myself.<sup>1</sup>

However, Samuel was both right and wrong about his father's dislike, because Canon Butler was a charming, benevolent, amiable

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1. Henry Festing Jones: *Samuel Butler. A Memoir*, Vol.1 (London, 1920) pp. 20—21

person in the outward relationships of life, while, actuated by the highest moral principles as the code for men to live by and the only passport for salvation, he was the oppressor of his son. Samuel, on the other hand, had an enquiring spirit and a keen sense of justice, but his father cared little for justice and much for the conventional morality. Instead of giving Samuel straight answers to his questions, Canon Butler often put him off. Samuel was always disappointed without getting any of the reasons why from Canon Butler. We cannot find a complete resemblance between Canon Butler and Theobald Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh*. Canon Butler's good nature cannot be found in Theobald. He is the Canon Butler of the son's imagining, typical of law-abiding people.

The affair which affected most fatally this dislike was the long dispute between them over money which followed Samuel's refusal of ordination and his declaration to be independent as a painter. In Canon Butler's view, there were only two possible professions for a son who had rejected the ordination; either a schoolmaster or a lawyer. He threatened Samuel that he would stop offering financial aid if his son would take neither of the two professions. This is the same in the case of Theobald, though he is so timid and has so little self-will that he settles down very thoroughly to the life of a country clergyman, and feels no qualms about sending his son, with no questions asked, into the same vocation. From this personal experience, Samuel became strictly assured that, to escape from being trapped by his parents and to be self-reliant, a son must learn early how to earn money and should be independent of his parents financially. He wrote to his mother on March 10, 1859 after some experience of work in a London slum parish.

You would, with the best intentions in the world, make me a bed that I know very well would not fit me. I know that when I am in, escape is impossible; and, knowing that I have duties to myself to perform even more binding on me than those to my parents, with

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all respect adopt the alternative of rejecting the pounds, shillings, and pence and going in search of my own bread my own way.<sup>2</sup>

Butler's notions on family are reflected in *Erewhon*. Before proceeding to *Erewhon*, I would like to quote his note titled "My Son".

I have told my son that he must begin by finding me a wife to become his mother who shall satisfy both himself and me. But this is only one of the many rocks on which we have hitherto split. We should never have got on together; I should have had to cut him off with a shilling either for laughing at Homer, or for refusing to laugh at him, or both, or neither, but still cut him off. So I settled the matter long ago by turning a deaf ear to his importunities and sticking to it that I would not get him at all. Yet his thin ghost visits me at times and, though he knows that it is no use pestering me further, he looks at me so wistfully and reproachfully that I am half-inclined to turn tail, take my chance about his mother and ask him to let me get him after all. But I should show a clean pair of heels if he said "Yes."

Besides, he would probably be a girl.<sup>3</sup>

Butler allotted this personal and self-centered notion to the Erewhonian's hypothesis that the parents are not responsible even if they thwart their children and bring up them in wrong ways:

. . . the Erewhonians believe in pre-existence. . . but they believe that it is of their own free act and deed in a previous state that they come to be born into this world at all. . .

They hold that the unborn are perpetually plaguing and tormenting the married of both sexes, fluttering about them incessantly, and giving them no peace either of mind or body until they have consented to take them under their protection.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Jones: *A Memoir, op. cit.*, p.66

3. Henry Festing Jones, ed., *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler* (New York 1917), p.366

4. Samuel Butler: *Erewhon*, with an afterword by Kingsley Amis (New York 1960) pp.137-138.

This satire implies the Catechism of the Church of England which makes it a principle to please parents. In *The Way of All Flesh*, Overton remarks:

I think the Church Catechism has a good deal to do with the unhappy relations which commonly even now exist between parents and children. That work was written too exclusively from the parental point of view; the person who composed it did not get a few children to come in and help him; he was clearly not young himself, nor should I say it was the work of one who liked children—in spite of the words “my good child” which, if I remember rightly, are once put into the mouth of the catechist and, after all, carry a harsh sound with them.<sup>5</sup>

The “Birth Formulæ”, written words of a baby signed by a friend of the parents, giving the parents freedom from all responsibility on the score of its birth, suggests the baptism ministered to babies which fetters their self-will all through their lives. However, the parents, who have obtained the “Birth Formula”, are a little uneasy until they have got the child’s own signature at all. “So, when he is about fourteen, these good people partly bribe him by promises of greater liberty and good things, and partly intimidate him through their great power of making themselves actively unpleasant to him, so that though there is a show of freedom made, there is really none.”<sup>6</sup> This is the satire on the re-baptism administered by the Church of England to confirm the child’s faith. In *The Way of All Flesh*, George brings water from the Jordan to baptize his grandson Ernest, and thinks that “Such a name might, like his having been baptized in water from the Jordan, have a permanent effect upon the boy’s character, and

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5. Samuel Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, with introduction by Theodore Dreiser, (New York, 1936) , p. 45

6. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 140

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influence him for good during the more critical periods of his life."<sup>7</sup>

The distinguishing peculiarity of the Erewhonians that they seldom quite believe in any matter they profess themselves to be quite certain about is satirized in the dialogue between the author and the Professor of Unreason. It implies the dialogue between Samuel and his father.

I remember asking him whether he did not think it would do harm to a lad's principles, by weakening his sense of the sanctity of his word and of truth generally, that he should be led into entering upon a solemn declaration as to the truth of things about which all that he can certainly know is that he knows nothing—whether, in fact, the teachers who soled him, or who taught anything as a certainty of which they were themselves uncertain, were not earning their living by impairing the truth-sense of their pupils ( a delicate organization mostly) , and by vitiating one of their most sacred instincts. . . No one, he answered, expected that the boy either would or could know all that he said he knew; but the word was full of compromises; and there was hardly any affirmation which would bear being interpreted literally. Human language was too gross a vehicle of thought—thought being incapable of absolute translation.<sup>8</sup>

A law without faith or religion of compromises attributed to the Church of England is satirized here. Instead of being given a straight answer to his question, the author is put off by the Professor of Unreason, just as Samuel Butler was by his father, Canon Butler.

The threatening words of the magistrate of "The World of the Unborn" are those of Butler himself. He warns the applicant anxious to leave his world of the infinite risk that he might draw utterly unsympathetic parents. The applicant's initial character must be drawn by lot. This implies that Butler is satirizing the gifts selected by God, just as he criticized Charles Darwin's "Natural Selection" which seemed to him lacking in man's

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7. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 112

8. Butler; *Erewhon*, p. 141

conscious striving for the formation of his character. For Butler, the magistrate remarks:

Remember also, that if you go into the world you will have free will; that you will be obliged to have it; that there is no escaping it; that you will be fettered to it during your whole life, and must on every occasion do that which on the whole seems best to you at any given time, no matter whether you are right or wrong in choosing it. Your mind will be a balance for considerations, and your action will go with the heavier scale. How it shall fall will depend upon the kind of scales which you may have drawn at birth, the bias which they will have obtained by use, and the weight of the immediate considerations. If the scales were good to start with, and if they have not been outrageously tampered with in childhood, and if the combinations into which you enter are average ones, you may come off well; but there are too many 'ifs' in this, and with the failure of any one of them your misery is assured.<sup>9</sup>

Butler's idea on money is reflected in *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*. He strictly realized that parents' money brought forth their tyranny over their children. In *The Way of All Flesh*, Overton remarks, "When a man is very fond of his money it is not easy for him at all times to be very fond of his children also. The two are like God and Mammon."<sup>10</sup> George's money was "never naughty; his money never made noise or litter, and did not spill things on the tablecloth at meal times, or leave the door open when it went out."<sup>11</sup> Butler thought the only way to become free from his parents' tyranny was to learn early the art of earning his money. Ernest asks himself:

Why should the generations overlap one another at all? Why cannot we be buried as eggs in neat little cells with ten or twenty thousand pounds each wrapped round us in Bank of England notes,

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9. Butler: *Erewhon*, pp. 146—147

10. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 30

11. *ibid.*, p. 31

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and wake up, as the sphex wasp does, to find that its papa and mamma have not only left ample provision at its elbow, but have been eaten by sparrows some weeks before it began to live consciously on its own account?<sup>12</sup>

The schools he attended did not fill his desire at all. He is satirizing the Canon Butlers in Erewhon (England) who send their children to the Colleges of Unreason (public schools, Oxford or Cambridge) for the Ydgrun-worship (the conventional code, respectability and Christianity) to give them the hypothetical (classical) education. This education in England prevented the children from keeping abreast with the "materialism" produced by the new bourgeoisie and learning how to win their bread. Butler was very much concerned with the fact that the education for his own class helped the parents to hinder the children from their independence.

#### The Family

I believe that more unhappiness comes from this source than from any other — I mean from the attempt to prolong family connection unduly and to make people hang together artificially who would never naturally do so. The mischief among the lower classes is not so great, but among the middle and upper classes it is killing a large number daily. And the old people do not really like it much better than the young.<sup>13</sup>

He repeats this idea in *Erewhon*.

With the less well-dressed classes the harm was not so great; for among those, at about ten years old, the child has to begin doing something: if he is capable he makes his way up; if he is not, he is at any rate not made more incapable by what his friends are

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12. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, pp. 115-116

13. Jones, ed., *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, p. 31



pleased to call his education. <sup>14</sup>

Butler's obsessive horror of being trapped by these forces and his inquiry for the way of free will, forbade him to accept Darwin's new theory of "Natural Selection" from among chance, or at least unexplained "variations" as the main force in the development of species. He wanted to put the stress on the effects of conscious striving. He wanted to believe that the species changed and adapted themselves by trying and learning, and were not merely passive victims of "Natural Selection".

Let me try to summarize Butler's theory on evolution.

In *Erewhon*, he presents the notion that all machines are the extensions of the limbs of man. There is no difference between machines and limbs as regards both being tools. However, our limbs have been designed with our intelligence for the particular uses they fulfil, just as man for his own purposes has designed, modified, and perfected with his intelligence those machines which exist outside himself. So complete an identification between means and ends could only have been realized intelligently. The problem then confronted him: how could the descendants of the primordial cell intelligently do their work when they knew nothing about it? Butler answered that they did it by "Unconscious Memory," which was able to assert itself by reason of the oneness of personality between parents and offspring. Thus the return of the associated ideas awoke the memories proper to the occasion, and the creature is able to do things about which otherwise it could know nothing.

To explain more concretely this hypothesis of a real continuity of memory between parents and children, he demonstrates how all the actions we do best we do unconsciously. To reach this height of unconscious proficiency it is clear that we must have done the action very many times before; and, this, we know, is exactly the case with all the things we do

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14. Butler: *Erewhon*, pp. 153-154

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most easily—breathing, digesting, the circulating of the blood. We usually admit that our intelligence works only when we do something consciously, and regard our unconscious work as just hereditary. Butler disagrees with this notion. Let me give an example. When we Japanese begin to learn English, we mistake the sound 'f' for 'h', or we have trouble in pronouncing the sound 'th' or 'l'. However, as we practice and become proficient in English, we can tell 'f' and 'h' without trying to recall the rule, and our tongue sets itself in the right place when we try to pronounce 'th' or 'l'. Similarly our knowledge becomes an unconscious habit in proportion as it comes near perfection. Speaking English easily and perfectly is acquired by repeated trials and failures with intelligence. This can be applied to a baby's instinct of sucking milk.

Since this notion is true, we must get rid of our prejudice that what we call personality begins at birth and ends at death. It is no more possible to deny identity between the baby of ten minutes old and the old man of eighty into which it developed, than to deny identity of personality between the embryo five minutes or five months before its birth as a baby and the baby of ten minutes old. The embryo is related by the spermatozoon or the ovum to the father and the mother. We are related to the ancestors over ten millions of years. Traced back to the origin, all creatures are related to the primordium. Thus, the unerring nature of our unconscious action or the developed organs of our body are a proof of the force our past experiences exert within us: the "Unconscious Memory". That was part of each individual's biological inheritance and could be passed or enriched by the new or improved habits formed during the individual's lifetime.

What he (Butler) was rebelling against was, however, essentially the same thing as was anathema to many Christians — the conception of the living universe, and of man as part of it, as ruled by the blind chance of unexplained biological variations selected

by the inexorable laws of a purely material environment. He could make fun of the God of tradition; but he could not bear to make such fun as this view seemed to make fun of man... and he could not endure to think of himself, and of other men, as mere 'sports', with no real power to shape their own lives. What he was really looking for was a theory, not so much of biological, as of social, evolution, that would allow man a creative role not only as an individual, but as a link in a long chain of succeeding generations participating in a sustained common effort.<sup>15</sup>

Butler's respect for the family as the great transmitting agency of acquired habits seems to be inconsistent with his horror of being trapped by his family, but he laid more emphasis on the child's business to modify the inherited habits and develop new ones.

The child's business in life was not simply to take over what the parents transmitted, but to build something new on the foundations thus provided; and Butler saw this as involving an incessant conflict between the parents' wish to keep the child in the old grooves and the child's creative urge to escape — not from his inheritance, but from being limited by it in shaping his own course.

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The words of the magistrate in "The World of the Unborn" reflect this Butler's theory as a philosophical view, not as a biological view. His obsession with this notion can be seen in the fact that he wrote on the hereditary development over the four generations in *The Way of All Flesh*.

Old John Pontifex is the only amiable person besides Ernest Pontifex. His son George succeeds in life as a well-to-do businessman. But his success is due to his shrewdness. He has been cleverly ingratiating himself with men of education or wealth. The diary which he wrote while

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15. G. D. H. Cole: *Samuel Butler*. (Longmans 1952) , p. 30

16. *ibid.*, p. 31

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traveling through Europe reveals that he is not a man of sincerity or originality. In it, he expresses a clergyman's stereotyped emotion, not brought forth from his original one. Theobald, the son of George, is more severely satirized. He is depicted as a man without self-will. A clergyman in a village forces his daughter Christina upon Theobald. She is chosen from among five daughters by playing at cards for Theobald. He cannot reject the ordination forced on by his father, and try to provide the same profession for his son Ernest. Butler's satire is against these sons' lack of duty as children to build something new on the foundations inherited through their "Unconscious Memory". Ernest listens to the voice of his true self:

You are surrounded on every side by lies which would deceive even the elect, if the elect were not generally so uncommonly wide awake; the self of which you are conscious, your reasoning and reflecting self, will believe these lies and bid you act in accordance with them. This conscious self of yours, Ernest, is a prig begotten of prigs and trained in priggishness; I will not allow it to shape your actions,... Obey *me*, your true self,... for I, Ernest, am the God who made you.<sup>17</sup>

### *Chapter 2. Religion*

The system of the Church of England is ironically put in parallel with that of "The Musical Banks" in Erewhon. The currency of these Banks has no commercial value in the outside world, just as the sermon of the Church of England has no value to the congregation. The people in Erewhon go to the Musical Banks to keep some balance there and to be considered respectable, just as those in England go to church to give their false faith to Heaven for respectability. A lady in Erewhon does not count the amount of the money handed by the cashier, but puts it into her purse and goes back to her seat after dropping a few pieces of the

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17. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 190

other coinage into an alms box. This implies the works without any faith given to Heaven. In this situation, it is natural that the Church of England gives no relief to the sick souls just as The Musical Banks cannot save the people from financial ruin. About this unpopularity of the Musical Banks, a manager says, "It has been more or less true till lately; but now we have put fresh stained glass windows into all the banks in the country, and repaired the buildings, and enlarged the organs; the presidents, moreover, have taken to riding in omnibuses and talking nicely to people in the streets, and to remembering the ages of their children, and giving them things when they were naughty, so that all would henceforth go smoothly."<sup>18</sup> This outward respectability and the flattering of the presidents are also ridiculed in the case of Theobald, the clergyman, in *The Way of All Flesh*. I have found many satirical parallels between *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*, and noticed the comparison leads to the real significance of Butler's satire. Theobald finds scope for useful work in the rebuilding of Battersby church where he was newly ordained, and he carries out the work at considerable cost, towards which he subscribes liberally himself, but the result is not satisfactory at all. His wife Christina complains that there can be nothing in common between Theobald and his parishioners, and that his ability is thrown away upon such a place. His habit is to trudge through muddy lanes and over long sweeps of plover-haunted pastures to visit a dying cottager's wife, taking her meat and wine from his own table. However, his rigid theology cannot satisfy and console the soul of the simple-minded farmer.

Erewhonians say that the current coin of the newly-established banks is dross in comparison with the coinage of the Musical Banks, but they sometimes make fun of the whole system of the Musical Banks. I think,

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18. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 119

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the newly-established banks suggest the dissenting churches in England.

But in the evening later on I saw three very old men come chuckling out of a dissenting chapel, and surely enough they were my old friends the black smith, the carpenter and the shepherd. There was a look of content upon their faces.<sup>19</sup>

The three people who came out of a dissenting chapel belonged to a Church of England.

The faces of the cashiers and the managers of the Musical Banks are in contrast to those of the Erewhonians, and this description seems to imply the same contrast of appearance between Theobald and his parishioners (farmers) .

They did not please me; they lacked, with few exceptions, the true Erewhonian frankness; and an equal number from any other class would have looked happier and better men. When I met them in the street they did not seem like other people, but had, as a general, a cramped expression upon their faces which pained and depressed me.<sup>20</sup>

They (the farmers) are full-bodied, healthy and contented; but between him (Theobald) and them there is a great gulf fixed. A hard and drawn look begins to settle about the corners of his mouth, so that even if he were not in a black coat and white tie a child might know him for a parson.<sup>21</sup>

What brought about this difference of faces between the two in each case? Those cashiers or managers at the Musical Banks, and Theobald, the representative clergyman of the Church of England, have an agony caused by the similar situation: Early in their lives, they were placed

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19. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 92

20. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 120

21. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 97

in the position to support a system in which they had no faith; other people refrain from speaking frankly in their presence.

A man's expression is his sacrament; it is the outward and visible sign of his inward and spiritual grace, or want of grace; and as I looked at the majority of these men, I could not help feeling that there must be a something in their lives which had stunted their natural development, and that they would have been more healthy minded in any other profession. I was always sorry for them, for in nine cases out of ten they were well-meaning persons; they were in the main very poorly paid; their constitutions were as a rule above suspicion; and there were recorded numberless instances of their self-sacrifice and generosity; but they had had the misfortune to have been betrayed into a false position at an age for the most part when their judgement was not matured, and after having been kept in studied ignorance of the real difficulties of the system.

Few people would speak quite openly and freely before them, which struck me a very bad sign. When they were in the room every one would talk as though all currency save that of the Musical Banks should be abolished; and yet they knew perfectly well that even the cashiers themselves hardly used the Musical Bank money more than other people. It was expected of them that they should appear to do so.<sup>22</sup>

He does not like this branch of his profession — indeed he hates it! — but will not admit it to himself. The habit of not admitting things to himself has become a confirmed one with him. Nevertheless there haunts him an ill defined sense that life would be pleasanter if there were no sick sinners, or if they would at any rate face an eternity of torture with more indifference. He does not feel that he is in his element. The farmers look as if they were in their element.<sup>23</sup>

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22. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 121

23. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 97

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He returns home, conscious that he has done his duty, and administered the comforts of religion to a dying sinner. His admiring wife awaits him at the Rectory, and assures him that never yet was clergyman so devoted to the welfare of his flock. He believes her; he has a natural tendency to believe anything that is told him, and who should know the facts of the case better than his wife? Poor fellow! He has done his best, but what does a fish's best come to when the fish is out of water?<sup>24</sup>

The clergyman is expected to be a kind of human Sunday. Things must not be done in him which are venial in the weekday classes. He is paid for this business of leading a stricter life than other people. It is his *raison d'être*. If his parishioners feel that he does this, they approve him, for they look upon him as their own contribution towards what they deem a holy life. That is why the clergyman is so often called a vicar — he being the person whose vicarious goodness is to stand for that of those entrusted to his charge.<sup>25</sup>

### Chapter 3. Education

The main feature in the system of "The Colleges of Unreason" in Erewhon is the prominence which they give to a study called "hypothetics". Its object is to open the students' eyes to the possibilities which might happen in this world, and so to prepare them for all sorts of emergencies.

For this study, the students are required to learn what is called "the hypothetical language" — "a language which was originally composed at a time when the country was in a very different state of civilization to what it is at present, a state which has long since disappeared and been superseded."<sup>26</sup>

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24. *ibid.*, p. 96

25. *ibid.*, pp. 156-157

26. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 161



The store they set by this hypothetical language can hardly be believed; they will even give any one a maintenance for life if he attains a considerable proficiency in the study of it; nay, they will spend years in learning to translate some of their own good poetry into the hypothetical language—to do so with fluency being reckoned a distinguishing mark of a scholar and a gentleman. Heaven forbid that I should be flippant, but it appeared to me to be a wanton waste of good human energy that men should spend years and years in the perfection of so barren an exercise, when their own civilization presented problems by the hundred which cried aloud for solution and would have paid the solver handsomely; but people know their own affairs best. If the youths chose it for themselves I should have wondered less; but they do not choose it; they have it thrust upon them, and for the most part are disinclined towards it.<sup>27</sup>

If any graduate from one of these Colleges of Unreason should succeed in life, it is because he was actively engaged in exercises and sports in spite of the great harm inflicted by the hypothetical language. This is a straight criticism of the classical education, Latin and Greek, on which Oxford, Cambridge and public schools in England placed the most emphasis. In *the Way of All Flesh*, Ernest, who is a student of a Roughborough public school, listens to the voice of his inner-self which persuades him to spend more time in growing his body than in studying Latin and Greek.

You are not strong enough to attend to your bodily growth, and to your lessons too. Besides, Latin and Greek are great humbugs; the more people know of them the more odious they generally are; the nice people whom you delight in either never knew any at all or forgot what they had learned as soon as they could; they never turned to the classics after they were no longer

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27. Butler: *Erewhon*, pp. 161-162

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forced to read them; therefore they are nonsense, all very well in their own time and country, but out of place here... Spend your time in growing bone and muscle; these will be much more useful to you than Latin and Greek, nor will you ever be able to make them if you do not do so now, whereas Latin and Greek can be acquired at any time by those who want them.<sup>28</sup>

As I have mentioned in the chapter on the Family, this classical education, in spite of the physical exercises or sports, hindered the children of Butler's class from learning the art of earning their own living which was the indispensable way for them to be independent of their parents' force.

I am sure that much harm was done to the children of the sub-wealthy classes, by the system which passes current among the Erewhonians as education. The poorest children suffered least—if destruction and death have heard the sound of wisdom, to a certain extent poverty has done so also.<sup>29</sup>

He (George) pitied himself for the expensive education which he was giving his children; he did not see that the education cost the children far more than it cost him, inasmuch as it cost them the power of earning their living easily rather than helped them towards it, and ensured their being at the mercy of their father for years after they had come to an age when they should be independent. A public school education cuts off a boy's retreat; he can no longer become a labourer or a mechanic, and these are the only people whose tenure of independence is not precarious.<sup>30</sup>

The professors of the Colleges of Unreason are very much alike Dr. Skinner, the headmaster of Roughborough school, both in appearance and

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28. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, pp. 189-190

29. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 167

30. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 36

thought. These educators have disgusting faces like the bankers and Theobald. "The expression on the faces of these people (the professors) was repellent."<sup>31</sup> "He (Dr. Skinner) was a passionate, half-turkey-cock, half-gander of a man whose sallow, bilious face..."<sup>32</sup> The expression of these people, as Butler says, is "the outward and visible sign of their inward and spiritual want of grace."<sup>33</sup> The professors "had the disgusting fear-of-giving-themselves-away disease."<sup>34</sup> Dr. Skinner "could scare the timid, but he would take to his heels readily enough if he were met firmly."<sup>35</sup> We can notice that Butler tried to draw a satirical picture of those educators as well as the clergymen who pretended to live an honest life.

Paradoxically, Butler severely criticizes this hypocrisy in education and religion, while he praises the study of "unreason" through the mouths of the professors of Unreason. They insist on the necessity of moderate "unreason" which leads to the "mean" — highly characteristic of Butler's philosophy.

Life, they urge, would be intolerable if men were to be guided in all they did by reason and reason only... Extremes are along logical, but they are always absurd; the mean is illogical, but an illogical mean is better than the sheer absurdity of an extreme. There are no follies and no unreasonablenesses so great as those which can apparently be irrefragably defended by reason itself, and there is hardly an error into which men may not easily be led if they base their conduct upon reason only. . . . The professors of Unreason deny that they undervalue reason: none can be more convinced than they are, that if the double currency cannot be

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31. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 170
  32. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 165
  33. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 121
  34. *ibid.*, p. 170
  35. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 165

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rigorously deduced as a necessary consequence of human reason, the double currency should cease forthwith; but they say that it must be deduced from no narrow and exclusive view of reason which should deprive that admirable faculty of the one-half of its own existence. Unreason is a part of reason; it must therefore be allowed its full share in stating the initial conditions.<sup>36</sup>

This is the most important element of Butler's philosophies. He (Ernest) had a horror of being caught by any rigid reason, especially by that of Christianity, which Canon Butler (Theobald) forced on him as a code to live in this world and thwarted his personality. Overton preaches for Butler on "virtue and vice" to insist on his philosophy just as the professors did on "reason and unreason".

Rare virtues are like rare plants or animals, things that have not been able to hold their own in the world. A virtue to be serviceable must, like gold, be alloyed with some commoner but more durable metal... There is no useful virtue which has not some alloy of vice, and hardly any vice, if any, which carries not with it a little dash of virtue; virtue and vice are like life and death, or mind and matter-things which cannot exist without being qualified by their opposite. . . . That vice plays homage to virtue is notorious; we call this hypocrisy; there should be a word found for the homage which virtue not unfrequently pays, or at any rate would be wise in paying, to vice.<sup>37</sup>

The Erewhonians hold that "unalloyed virtue is not a thing to be immoderately indulged in."<sup>38</sup> The straighteners say that "the most that can be truly said for virtue is that there is a considerable balance in its favour."<sup>39</sup> But they urge that "there is much pseudo-virtue going

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36. Butler: *Erewhon*, pp. 162-163

37. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 121

38. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 87

39. *ibid.*, p. 88

about.”<sup>40</sup> Ernest was “generally more inclined to moderate vice than to immoderate virtue.”<sup>41</sup> He “followed his instinct for the most part, rather than his reason.”<sup>42</sup>

As in the case of “reason” and “virtue”, Butler insists that “genius” should not be rigorously searched for.

Their view evidently was that genius was like offences — needs must that it come, but woe unto that man through whom it comes. A man’s business, they hold, is to think as his neighbours do, for Heaven help him if he thinks good what they count bad. . . I told them of Homer’s noble line to the effect that a man should strive ever to be foremost and in all things to outvie his peers; but they said that no wonder the countries in which such a detestable maxim was held in admiration were always flying at one another’s throats. “Why,” asked one Professor, “should a man want to be better than his neighbours? Let him be thankful if he is no worse.”<sup>43</sup>

Overton stresses that “the greatest and wisest of mankind will be almost always found to be the meanest. . . it is no small feather in a man’s cap if he has been no worse than his neighbours.”<sup>44</sup> And he blames one of Homer’s heroes, saying, “What an uncompanionable, disagreeable person he must have been!”<sup>45</sup> In short, Butler’s respect for the “mean” should be called “a philosophy of commonsense”.<sup>46</sup> Although people have a strong natural bias towards “reason”, “virtue” and “genius”, they should not be rigorously searched for. That will become the sheer absurdity of an extreme. Hypocrisy, the typical feature

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40. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 88

41. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 187

42. *ibid.*, p. 187

43. Butler: *Erewhon*, pp. 164-165

44. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 120

45. *ibid.*, p. 120

46. Cole: *Samuel Butler* (Denver 1948), p. 87

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of the professors and clergymen in Butler's age, will be produced in such a case. We must also seek for "unreason", "vice" and "mediocrity" as their "natural complements".<sup>47</sup> However, if one seeks for this extremity too rigorously, it will also become the sheer absurdity of an extreme. Through moderate search for "unreason", Butler tried to find the great "mean". "The greatest and wisest of mankind will be almost always found to be the meanest."<sup>48</sup> — the one who takes a moderate care of everything in life: health, money, morality and so forth. "If Mr. Pontifex (George) is to be blamed it is for not having eaten and drunk less and thus suffered less from his liver, and lived perhaps a year or two longer,"<sup>49</sup> and "it is involved in the very essence of things that rich men who die old shall have been mean."<sup>50</sup>

This philosophy is shown in Erewhonians' notion of "crime and illness" in a finely satirical way. According to "reason", a sick person is taken care of by a doctor in a hospital and a criminal is severely punished by law. This is logical. But, in England, especially in Butler's environment, this "reason" was observed to its extreme. To Butler, it became the sheer absurdity.

When Ernest was in his second year, Theobald, as I have already said, began to teach him to read. He began to whip him two days after he had begun to teach him. "It was painful," as he said to Christina, but it was the only thing to do and it was done. The child was puny, white and sickly, so they sent continually for the doctor who dosed him with calomel and James's powder. All was done in love, anxiety, timidity, stupidity, and impatience. They were stupid in little things; and he that is stupid in little will be

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47. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 162

48. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 120

49. *ibid.*, p. 118

50. *ibid.*, p. 120

stupid also in much.<sup>51</sup>

In *Erewhon*, Butler is drawn towards "unreason" as the natural complement of "reason". Erewhonians regard ill-health or any misfortune as a crime, and a criminal is recognized with sympathy as requiring correction of his moral defects and most carefully tended at the public expense. This is "unreason". He "turned it inside out, or upside down, and saw what it looked like reverse."<sup>52</sup> Or he "turned the canvas of his life upside down."<sup>53</sup> In this "unreason", we can notice his ideal symbolically. Butler experienced the rigid respect for "reason" which produced great misfortunes. Ernest became ill because he was often flogged by his father who was the rigid observer of "reason". Theobald and Dr. Skinner were also the victims of this sheer absurdity of an extreme as proved by their unpleasing features. Through such an experience, Butler has a desire to have a comfortable company — healthy, good-looking, and fortunate men.

A man should not only have his own way as far as possible, but he should only consort with things that are getting their own way so far that they are at any rate comfortable. Unless for short times under exceptional circumstances, he should not even see things that have been stunted or starved, much less should he eat meat that has been vexed by having been over-driven or underfed, or afflicted with any disease; nor should he touch vegetables that have not been well grown. For all these things cross a man; whatever a man comes in contact with in any way forms a cross with him which will leave him better or worse, and the better things he is crossed with the more likely he is to live long and happily. All things must be crossed a little or they would cease to

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51. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 131

52. Cole: *Samuel Butler*, (Denver 1948) , p. 84

53. John F. Harris: *Samuel Butler: The Man and His Work*, (London 1916) , p. 28

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live—but holy things, such for example as Giovanni Bellini's saints, have been crossed with nothing but what is good of its kind.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, Erewhonians' "unreason" on "crime and illness" was Butler's ideal caused by his rebellion against his masters' extreme respect for "reason". However, to seek rigorously for this "unreason" becomes the sheer absurdity of an extreme, for his ideal is not realized except by moderate "unreason". We can notice the remarkable examples of this absurdity in *Erewhon*. Mr. Nosnibor is injured his health because he was severely flogged by the straightener to correct his moral defects. "There was a certain yellowness about his eyes which argued a bilious habit of his body."<sup>55</sup> But the straightener avoids to inquire after the physical well-being of his patient. A lady called Mahaina is suffering from indigestion, but she pretends to be a martyr to dipsomania, because "If a person ruin his health by excessive indulgence at the table or by drinking, they count it to be almost a part of the mental disease which brought it about, and so it goes for little, but they have no mercy on such illness as fevers or catarrhs or lung diseases, which to us appear to be beyond the control of the individual."<sup>56</sup> The jury, who passes a sentence upon a youth accused of pulmonary consumption, says, "It pains me much to see one who is yet so young. . . brought to this distressing condition by a constitution which I can only regard as radically vicious."<sup>57</sup> Each of these examples is a satire against a man enslaved by the extreme of "unreason".

Butler's rebellion against the real world of "reason" led him to construct an imaginary world of "unreason". I can imagine the satirist

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54. Butler: *The Way of All Flesh*, pp. 145-146

55. Butler: *Erewhon*, p. 86

56. *ibid.*, p. 87

57. *ibid.*, p. 91



conceived two effects through the description of Erewhon. One of the effects is that this extremity awakens people living in the other extremity to the truth of its sheer absurdity. The other is the creation of his "utopia" — the world of the "mean" where moral defects are tendered with sympathy and ill-fortuned people, mentally or physically, are not found at all.

Life and Love

To live is like to love — all reason is against it, and all healthy instinct for it.<sup>58</sup>

God and Men

To love God is to have good health, good looks, good sense, experience, a kindly nature and a fair balance of cash in hand.<sup>59</sup>

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58. Jones, ed., *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, p 227

59. *ibid.*, p. 33

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