

Editorial: What the Butler Said

T. S. Eliot, drawing himself up to the full height of a Harvard graduate student, pronounced Matthew Arnold to be ‘an undergraduate in philosophy’. The judgement is at best debatable when *Culture and Anarchy* and *Literature and Dogma* have been weighed with the Essay on Spinoza. What is most striking to a present-day reader is the range of learning that many of the Victorian sages could command. George Eliot translated Spinoza’s ethics. Regrettably, as far as we know, her version remains unpublished. Spinoza arises again in J. A. Froude’s *Short Studies of Great Subjects*—an author not likely to be known or noticed by many members of our contemporary literary intelligentsia. This brief listing already serves to illustrate how much of the unity of the Republic of Letters we have lost during our century, and we need not go on to call Coleridge and Wordsworth and Newman. Nowadays we have to go at least as far as France to find a conversation in which scientists and painters, politicians and lawyers, physicians and surgeons are all engaged with mutual comprehension and upon equal terms of discourse. The philosophical instruction commonly taken in the *terminale* fulfils the role attributable in Victorian England to the common inheritance of the learning of the three tongues.

One of the best and wisest of the Victorian sages displayed the riches of his knowledge and understanding in a series of Notebooks published only after his death and then only in a highly selective anthology. The items range from brief aphorisms to discursive chapters. The foundations of morality, he says, ‘are like other foundations: if you dig too much about them the superstructure will come tumbling down.’ He adds a few lines later that ‘to attempt to get at the foundations is to try to recover consciousness about things that have passed into the unconscious stage; it is pretty sure to disturb and derange those who try it on too much.’ A chapter on First Principles takes up the theme:

That our ideas are baseless, or rotten at the roots, is what few who study them will deny; but they are rotten in the same way as property is robbery, and property is robbery in the same way as our ideas are rotten at the roots, that is to say it is a robbery and it is not. No title to property, no idea and no living form (which is the embodiment of idea) is indefeasible if search be made far enough. Granted that our thoughts are baseless, yet they are so in the same way as the earth itself is both baseless and most firmly based, or again most stable and yet most in motion.

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A paragraph on 'Nature's Double Falsehood' is included in a collection on Truth and Convenience:

That one great lie she told about the earth being flat when she knew it was round all the time! And again how she stuck to it that the sun went round us when it was we who were going round the sun! This double falsehood has irretrievably ruined my confidence in her. There is no lie which she will not tell and stick to like a Gladstonian. How plausibly she told her tale, and how many ages was it before she was so much as suspected! And then when things did begin to look bad for her, how she brazened it out, and what a desperate business it was to bring her shifts and prevarications to book!

Philosophy is penetrated to the core in a neighbouring paragraph:

As a general rule philosophy is like stirring mud or not letting a sleeping dog lie. It is an attempt to deny, circumvent or otherwise escape from the consequences of the interlacing of the roots of things with one another. It professes to appease our ultimate 'Why?' though in truth it is generally the solution of a *simplex ignotum* by a *complex ignotius*. This, at least, is my experience of everything that has been presented to me as philosophy. I have often had my 'Why' answered with so much mystifying matter that I have left off pressing it through fatigue. But this is not having my ultimate 'Why' appeased. It is being knocked out of time.

But even if nothing from the Notebooks had been published we could still have perceived what a philosophical mind we have to deal with. The fact is evident from the titles and themes of his books: *Erewhon*, *The Fair Haven*, *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, *Life and Habit*, *Unconscious Memory*. Above all, he is known as the author of *The Way of All Flesh*, as his namesake, an earlier Samuel Butler, is known as the author of *Hudibras*.