

The Vicious Moralist and His Legacy: A Critical Reanalysis of Samuel Johnson as Moral Figure

Allen Walzem^{*}

Abstract

During the early modern period, Great Britain's single most popular form of writing, by far, was, "Religious in subject matter, didactic in intent" (Hunter, 1990: 225). Concurrently with this, the extreme working conditions of the industrial revolution, harsh labor and debt laws, and broad international colonization led to widespread subjugation and exploitation of peoples, both domestically and internationally. The vast national production and consumption of moral discourse stressing Christian virtues like charity, love, forgiveness, etc., did not translate into recognizably related policy; reading and writing about "doing good" seemed to substitute for the actual practice.

One of the best and most popular of these morality writers was Samuel Johnson, who wrote a long series of morality tracts known as "The Rambler." Using sharp logic and beautifully balanced Latinate prose, Johnson constructed clear arguments for why we should improve ourselves, which naturally led many to assume he, himself, was a paragon of virtue. However, his own journals and the numerous biographies written about Johnson reveal that he was long habituated to vice, and surprisingly, the juxtaposition of his Rambler essays and biographical writings reveals that he had a tendency to most vehemently exhort against those very vices that he was most guilty of

^{*} Assistant Professor, Department of Applied English, Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology, E-mail: awalzem@gmail.com.

in his own life. As a result, “The Age of Johnson” is well named: Johnson was truly emblematic of this time period, not just in his positive examples of learning, good sense, and erudition, but also in his negative ones, of vociferously extolling one type of behavior while engaging in its opposite.

Keywords: Samuel Johnson, Moral Writing, Eighteenth-century Britain, Vice

By far the greatest single category of books published in the eighteenth century, as in previous centuries, was that composed of religious works. An average of over two hundred such works was published annually throughout the century. *The Pilgrim's Progress*—although little noted by polite authors, and then usually with derision—went through one hundred and sixty editions by 1792; while at least ten devotional manuals had sales of over thirty editions during the eighteenth century, and many other religious and didactic works were equally popular. (Watt, 1950: 49-50)

When looking at the interaction of writing and social trends in the early modern era, one question to ask is, did the production and consumption of all of this print—moral instruction and otherwise—manage to have much impact on improving and elevating individuals and their ethics? Or, ironically, did writing, reading, and talking about morality not lead to more ethical behavior but instead become its substitute? Although I hate to sabotage the suspense this question might have raised, everyone knows, I believe, that, in the big picture at least, the answer to both of these questions is a qualified “no.” When judged by most criteria, British people did not improve morally immediately before or during “the age of Johnson.” In the midst of a long listing of rampant crime, government corruption, unfair labor practices, harsh laws and brutal punishments, as well as the use of arms to subjugate and exploit foreign lands, the historian Will Durant asserts that, “All in all, this half century [the mid to late 1700s] was the most corrupt and merciless in English history” (Durant, 1965: 68). Within Britain itself, individuals with monetary problems often found themselves in workhouses or debtors’ prisons. Abroad, with the help of her powerful navy and well-trained military, Great Britain sent ships to the far corners of the earth and colonized or took control of large chunks of Africa, North America, and Asia, including essential portions of India and China—the sole purpose of which was to draw as much wealth as possible from these areas by any means necessary. It was also during this era that England wrested the incredibly lucrative and unspeakably evil slave trade from France, guaranteeing for a century huge profits made from human suffering.

Eventually, the logic that allowed the monetary exploitation of others would come to be used more and more within England as well. It should be remembered that when

the German Karl Marx documented the horrors of factory exploitation, he was not living in Germany but in England, and saw the ratio of fantastically rich to miserably poor become so great that he grew convinced mass revolution was inevitable. He was only drawing conclusions from what was visible to everyone with eyes to see.

‘I am convinced’ wrote Thorold Rogers . . . ‘that at no period of English history for which authentic records exist, was the condition of manual labor worse than in the forty years from 1782 to 1821’, the period in which manufacturers accumulated fortunes rapidly, and in which the rent of agricultural land was doubled’ . . . [Carlyle said] Britons had been better off when they were medieval serfs. Industrial progress had left the proletarian so slight a share in the growing wealth that he was reverting to barbarism in manners, dress, amusements, and speech. ‘Civilization works its miracles,’ wrote Alexis de Toqueville on visiting Manchester; ‘civilized man is turned back almost into a savage.’ (Durant, 1975: 344)

A consensus was required at many levels of society to force laborers into such grim circumstances, and chilling scientific ideas were eagerly embraced because they seemed to provide “logical” arguments for supporting conditions frequently more horrendous than those endured by American slaves—perhaps only because slaves were valuable property, whereas British labor was treated as freely replaceable “parts” in the machine of production. “Thomas Malthus argued that it was useless to raise wages, for this would lead to larger families, increasing the pressure of population upon the food supply, and would soon restore the poverty that must forever result from the natural inequality of men.” Malthus’s friend, the great economist and historian Richard Ricardo, explained that “a rise in wages is never real, since it will soon be canceled by a rise in prices due to the increased cost in production . . . the proper wages for a laborer is the amount he needs to subsist and perpetuate (without increasing) his species” (Durant, 1975: 346). Of course, there were individuals who resisted this tendency of rationalized exploitation, but they were remarkably ineffective when struggling against such an enormous tide. We would think that the labor reformer Robert Owen was setting his goals very low when he merely “pleaded for a ‘factory act’ that would forbid the

employment of children under ten years of age,” but even with his good reputation and influence, he could not get support for such an extreme, unnecessary, and obviously unprofitable restriction on good business practice.

In most people’s minds the industrial revolution was a positive event in human history. There was an enormous improvement in overall material wealth and technological knowledge at the national level, although it was offset by great misery and suffering for multitudes of forgotten individuals. Would Samuel Johnson, the great “John Bull” Tory, have approved of the methods of Britain’s advancement? The answer here is an unequivocal “no.” He would have been outraged. Johnson wrote many articles about just such kinds of exploitation, and always came down vociferously on the side of the exploited, for, “Nobody saw more clearly [than Johnson] the error of those who regarded . . . the prosperity of the State as distinct from the prosperity of the individuals who compose the State” (Macaulay, 1951: 552).

However, Johnson and men like him helped create an environment in which all previous assumptions could be called into question and rethought. This open-minded and questioning attitude lies behind the huge advances we associate with The Enlightenment, but also provided cover for a lot of cruelty and exploitation by people who would have been outraged if accused of being irreligious or immoral. One of the ways in which eighteenth-century thinkers paved the way for human exploitation had to do with their embracing the progressive zeitgeist of the era: Johnson and others used logic and reasoning rather than unquestioning allegiance to simple, unequivocal precepts (Christian or otherwise) in persuading people to try to be good. Of course, in general this is a good thing. Challenging long-held but unsupportable beliefs and forcing all actors to defend the legitimacy of their actions by subjecting them to close scrutiny is the chief way ancient superstitions and cultural ills (like witch burning) were done away with. However, using logic and reasoning to determine moral efficacy is a strategy more flexible, and hence manipulable, than merely applying rigid doctrine of “good” and “bad.” As we saw from the quotes from Malthus and Ricardo above, even well intentioned, kind-hearted people using faulty logic or mistaken premises could reach false conclusions that would be widely espoused as “progressive” by forces which stood to gain incalculably more by embracing the error than searching for the truth. And for the unscrupulous, rationality can be easily made to submit to rationalization. Of

course, Christian teachings have been bent and distorted to justify exploitation and cruelty by the unscrupulous or over-zealous almost since its inception. However, if the teachings of the New Testament are used as a benchmark, sins of exploitation can be objectively proven to be evil. In a world where material gain and progress come to be thought of as moral goods in their own right, however, much evil can be rationalized as acceptable for the “greater good.” Johnson cannot be blamed for evils that were performed by those misusing the techniques and ideas that were becoming popular under the broad banner of progressivism and science, but he was part of the movement which enabled them.

On another front, however, Johnson is much more culpable. Writing as “The Rambler,” Johnson was one of the most famous moral writers of the eighteenth century, and yet in his own life, he could not have been further from the moral precepts he encouraged his readers to follow. This, at the personal level, represents the pattern which Great Britain, at the national level would follow. By endlessly proselytizing for moral behavior while making no progress on correcting his own vices, Johnson embodies at the personal level much of what Britain would on the world stage. He was a pioneer of speaking out for good, while failing, in the crassest ways, to live up to the values he championed.

The remainder of this paper will fall into two parts. First, by citing from various writings about Johnson from his own journals and biographies about him written by his friends, I will make absolutely clear that Johnson was a “vicious” man (in the literal and traditional sense of the term, a man with “vices”) before moving onto the second and main part of my paper, “The Vicious Moralist,” where I will demonstrate the manner in which Johnson’s own moral writing focuses on exhorting his readers against those very vices of which Johnson himself was most guilty. At times this comes across as hypocritical, for Johnson seems to be preaching from high moral ground, when, in fact, the very sins he is demanding his readers refrain from are the very ones he himself committed daily.

Of course, Johnson himself was not evil or criminal, but did regularly substitute the writing about virtue for its actual practice, a tendency he eventually became, as we shall see, a master at rationalizing. The error of mistaking good thoughts for good practices was one Johnson should not have made, for he himself had diagnosed this

very tendency in the brilliant but wastrel friend of Johnson's youth, Richard Savage, about whom he wrote: "The reigning error of his life was, that he mistook the love for the practice of virtue, and indeed was not so much a good man as the friend of goodness" (Johnson, 1961: 103-104).

1.Vicious Johnson

One of the most popular sins, for readers and writers alike, are those sexual in nature. Sexual relations are considered sinful when performed outside of one's own marriage (committing adultery, prohibited by one of the Ten Commandments), or when an unmarried person engages in sexual intercourse (fornication). This is an interesting place to begin, because Johnson created his own set of rules which he shared with his friend and biographer, James Boswell:

He talked of the heinousness of the crime of adultery, by which the peace of families was destroyed. He said 'confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime; and therefore a woman who breaks her marriage vows is much more a criminal than a man who does it. A man, to be sure, is criminal in the sight of GOD; but he does not do his wife a very material injury, if he does not insult her; if, for instance, from mere wantonness of appetite, he steals privately to her chambermaid. Sir, a wife ought not greatly to resent this . . . a man will not, once in a hundred instances, leave his wife and go to a harlot, if his wife has not been negligent of pleasing.' (Boswell, 1963: 397-8)

This justification (or rationalization) on Johnson's part is not just theoretical, because Boswell discovered that Johnson did, in fact, secretly visit his wife's maid's bedroom at night, to kiss and touch her, etc. Boswell, who was a lawyer by profession, checked the matter thoroughly by asking, "And it was something different from a father's kiss?" to which the maid, Mrs. Desmoulins, replied, "Yes, indeed." Perhaps through modesty and embarrassment, Mrs. Desmoulins suggests that she and Johnson did not go past "the limits of decency." However, when asked if this was because Johnson lacked passion towards women, she retorted strongly: "Nay, Sir, I tell you no

man had stronger” (Boswell, 1991: 322-3). And although this is the only time where an actual partner of Johnson is named, elsewhere in his biography Boswell mentions that he read Johnson’s secret diary and learned that regarding sexual temptation, “he was sometimes overcome” (Boswell, 1925: 1126). Another of Johnson’s biographers was much less subtle than this, asserting that Johnson could be “blunt (according to the dramatist Arthur Murphy) in declaring that the greatest pleasure in life was fucking” (Brady, 1984: 111). Johnson clearly had a great weakness where physical pleasures were concerned, and lacked the willpower to combat them. Another area where he was well known to succumb to temptations which gave physical pleasure was in the realm of eating and drinking: Johnson was a glutton.

Johnson was recognized by all of his acquaintances as having a real problem controlling his appetites. He ate and drank massive amounts, to the point where it embarrassed his friends and upset his hosts. As James Boswell explains:

I never knew a man who relished good eating more than he did. When at table, he was totally absorbed in the business of the moment; his looks seemed riveted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very high company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite; which was so fierce, and indulged with such intenseness, that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible. To those whose sensations were delicate, this could not but be disgusting . . . [in addition, Johnson was remarkable] for the extraordinary quantity which he eat (sic). (Boswell, 1963: 332)

This tendency did not, apparently, only apply to eating when he was very hungry, but was a central facet of his character. As Mrs. Thrale puts it, “though [Johnson] could be rigidly *abstemious*, he was not a *temperate* man either in eating or drinking. He could refrain, but he could not use moderately” (Boswell, 1963: 332, Marginal Note by Hester Piozzi). His eating could be excessive to the point of endangering his life: “Dr. John Taylor recorded an occasion when Johnson ate so much of ‘a glorious haunch of venison’ that it was feared ‘he would have died of downright eating, and had not a surgeon been got to administer to him a without delay a glister he must have died’”

(Hibbert, 1979: 24). This is one of many unpleasant events that Boswell was apparently aware of, but thought best to omit from his own “Life of Johnson.” Johnson’s excessive consumption could embarrass, and even anger, his hosts—such as his drinking tea and coffee without stopping, sometimes until the supply was used up. If we are to believe Mrs. Thrale, he could consume 20 cups at a sitting. And this tendency towards extreme excess applied to alcohol as well, which Johnson wrestled with all of his life.

Although unable to stop eating and drinking, Johnson was nearly unable to *start* anything related to work or effort. Johnson was habitually lazy, leading not only to long periods of unemployment, but even extreme carelessness in regards dress and personal hygiene. He could be slothful and lethargic, and by his own admission would often not be able to rouse himself from bed until 2PM. For at least two of the writing projects for which he was paid in advance (the *dictionary* and *Lives of the English Poets*) Johnson was actually *years* late! Boswell quotes what Johnson himself wrote in his own journal. “I have made no reformation; and have lived totally useless, more sensual in thought, and more addicted to wine and meat . . . My indolence . . . has sunk into grosser sluggishness, and my dissipation spread into wilder negligence. My thoughts have been clouded with sensuality . . . [and] my appetites have predominated over my reason” (Boswell, 1963: 343).

In his personal relations, too, Johnson was short on the Christian virtues of modesty and humility, gentleness and tact. He was prone to be disagreeably contrary, and would easily get into arguments, sometimes becoming impossibly stubborn and recalcitrant. Although not violent, he would argue violently with almost anyone, and would vehemently and shamelessly try to force his will and opinions on those around him. His gentle friend, Hester Thrale Piozzi asserts that he “may perhaps somewhat justly be censured as arrogant,” and even goes so far as to say he had no “humility” (Piozzi, 1897: 296-297). The young woman novelist, Fanny Burney, describes a typical case of Johnson getting too aggressive and excited during an argument, to the point that he upset everyone else attending the social engagement. What is most surprising about it is that the topic was poetry. “His opposition was so warm, and his wit so satirical and exulting, that I was really quite grieved to see how unamiable he appeared, and how greatly he made himself dreaded by all, and by many abhorred. What a pity that he will not curb the *vehemence* of his love of victory and superiority!” (Burney, 2001: 190).

Often a person's moral lapses, personal peccadilloes, and vices are counterbalanced in the eyes of others due to the exhibition of particular warmth, self-sacrifice, and commitment to family. Unfortunately, this is also an area where Johnson's behavior was anything but exemplary. He neglected his mother and wife to extreme degrees, especially after he had used up all of their money. He only visited his mother once in the last 20 years of her life, and that was to mortgage her house. As for his wife, when Johnson married her, she had several hundred pounds in savings, which Johnson lost by starting a school, which eventually failed. She was eventually reduced to pawning all of her possessions to survive, during much of which time Johnson did not work or materially assist her in any meaningful way. During a considerable period of her suffering and indigence, according to his biographer James Clifford, Johnson enjoyed himself to a considerable degree staying with wealthy friends in Lichfield and cavorting with London roustabouts.

For an author who spent much of his time writing about the value and importance of hard work, piety, and good deeds, something is sorely amiss in this portrait. Of course no one is perfect, and it is not uncommon for Christian moralists to focus on their areas of greatest strength, while humbly and ashamedly confessing their moral failings—abasing themselves to some degree, so as to serve as negative examples for their readers. Examples of this can be seen in the writings of Saints Augustine and Jerome. However, this was not Samuel Johnson's approach. As we will see in the next section, he wrote the most energetically and passionately regarding just those areas where his failures were the most profound.

2. The Vicious Moralist

At one point, while traveling in Scotland with James Boswell, a Mr. M'Aulay asserted "he had no notion of people being in earnest in their good professions [assertions], whose practice was not suitable to them." When Johnson heard this, he "grew warm, and said 'Sir, are you so grossly ignorant of human nature as not to know that a man may be very sincere in good principles, without having good practices?'" (Boswell, 1958: 250). In his commentary Boswell vigorously defends Johnson's view, but one can easily see M'Aulay's point. Of course we may not always live up to our

own highest standards, but one who habitually professes high principles without following them tends to be justly labeled as a hypocrite. Johnson knew this, of course, and so we might conclude that what he means is that it is possible for someone to be able to sincerely explain *why* good principles are superior, and sincerely *believe* that they are superior, even be able to convert people into adopting those principles, but then habitually not act on them him or herself. This is Johnson in a nutshell. According to Boswell, Johnson sometimes admitted to his moral failings in conversation. However, he almost never does in his writing.

We have just seen that Johnson was a man of many vices. In this section we will first look at examples of Johnson teaching moral lessons that he clearly knew he himself did not follow. Johnson apparently did not consider his own habit of teaching good morals but not practicing them to be hypocrisy, and explains why on a number of occasions, although when doing so he generally does not acknowledge that he is talking about himself. For example, in *Rambler* 77 he suggests that an author on morality

may kindle in thousands and tens of thousands that flame which burnt but dimly in himself, through the fumes of passion, or the damps of cowardice. The vicious moralist may be considered as a taper, by which we are lighted through the labyrinth of complicated passions; he extends his radiance farther than his heat, and guides all that are within view, but burns only those who make too near approaches. (Johnson, *Rambler*, vol. 2, 1979: 41)

The final line, about the “guiding taper” of the vicious moralists burning only those who come too close refers to the harm that may come to people who actually see into the moralist’s private life. These could be injured in one of two ways. First, they are in a position to see the fatal disparity between the guide’s teaching and practice, and thereby may become disillusioned and fail to receive the benefit of the teaching which the more distant (and therefore blissfully ignorant) receive, who mistakenly assume their wise instructor to be a moral paragon, and follow his teachings rather than his actions. This meaning is made clearer in the above given quote’s sequel: “Admiration begins where acquaintance ceases; and his favourers are distant, but his enemies at hand” (Johnson, *Rambler* vol. 2, 1979: 42). The second way the vicious moralist may

harm his students who “make too near approaches” is by inadvertently teaching the bad with the good. The students will learn to feel pious and good through the experience of a sincere love of good principles, but also imbibe from their teacher the subtle notion that this can be substituted for their actual practice. James Boswell may well be an example of such a one.

Johnson’s biographers, with few exceptions, go to great lengths to harmonize Johnson the moralizer, with his clear theory of goodness, with Johnson the man, even though his own life, words, and actions, as we have seen, are often other than exemplary. It is not immediately clear why they tend to do this; Johnson himself neither followed nor supported the practice of bowdlerizing a man’s history, especially when it is done posthumously, and so cannot harm his subject directly. Boswell cites a man (M’leod) asking Johnson point-blank if “it was not wrong . . . to expose the defects” of a man whom one had been very close to. Johnson assured him it was not: “Why no, sir, after the man is dead; for then it is done historically” (Boswell, 1958: 160).

Walter Jackson Bate, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Johnson, is one of the most industrious in his efforts to clean Johnson up. However, he is also the only Johnson scholar I have encountered who specifies an understanding that Johnson’s moral writings are *not* representative of weaknesses and sins Johnson has recognized and conquered, but rather those he fears he will succumb to. Bate observes that “merely to list the topics of the essays that deal with human weaknesses, temptations, and trials is to list what [Johnson] spent a lifetime in battling in himself” (Bate, 1998: 312). Bate’s problem is that he implies that Johnson, so forearmed, is ultimately victorious—that is, morally, if not in practice—in his battles. In fact, Johnson’s moral writing is part of a response to the failings that regularly defeat him. This makes Johnson considerably less than an angel felling sin with the flaming sword of foresight, as Bate wants to imply.

The reason Johnson writes so powerfully and persuasively about morality is because he is so familiar, not with purity, but with sin. Contrary to Bate’s claim, in Johnson’s moral essays Johnson is *not* proactively warning himself against sin at all, but rather trying to assuage part of his own guilt and compensate for his own failings in the eyes of God by warning others *not to do as he has done*, and is, in fact, *still doing*. To put it another way, although he himself has already retired from the contest, beaten, Johnson is setting the moral bar high in his writings to give his readers a worthy goal to

aspire to. This is a position rarely taken in Johnson studies, but it should not be considered a novel reading: Johnson himself explicitly states the rationale and benefits of such an approach throughout *Rambler* No. 14. For example when he says that to improve—to raise the moral excellence of one’s self—it is “necessary for the idea of perfection to be proposed, that we may have some object to which our endeavours are to be directed; *and he that is most deficient in the duties of life, makes some atonement for his faults, if he warns others against his own failings, and hinders, by the salubrity of his admonitions, the contagion of his example*” (Johnson, *Rambler*, Vol. 1, 1979: 76). (Italics mine)

This makes it clear that as far as Johnson is concerned, it is acceptable to do one thing and say another if your overall intention is to do good. No doubt it helps, too, if you yourself are aware of the distance between your teaching and your actions. Through a long struggle with wrongdoing, even if one finally winds up on the losing end of the battle, one may become an expert on vice, weakness, and sin. In this scenario, one can perhaps wrest a small victory from the arms of defeat by not denying or rationalizing away one’s sins, but acknowledging them, asking God’s forgiveness in prayer, and using this intimate and expensively gained knowledge of moral transgression to warn others. Johnson himself is convinced such a practice is noble rather than dishonest:

Nothing is more unjust, however common, than to charge with hypocrisy him that expresses zeal for those virtues, which he neglects to practice; since he may be sincerely convinced of the advantages of conquering his passions, without having yet obtained the victory, as a man may be confident of the advantages of a voyage, or a journey, without having courage or industry to undertake it, and may honestly recommend to others, those attempts which he neglects himself. (*Rambler*, Vol. 1, 1979: 76)

Is a moralist at fault for not following his own teachings? Is the moralizer doubly vicious for ignoring his own advice not to sin and for “burning” his students by allowing them to see their teacher’s apparent insincerity? Johnson attacks this idea of the culpability of the vicious moralist, and even lashes out at the students who would be so harmed. He argues that readers should not be concerned if there is inconsistency

between an author's writings and his or her life. In fact they are fools to confound the two: "People are influenced more by what a man says, if his practice is suitable to it,—because they are blockheads. The more intellectual people are, the readier will they attend to what a man tells them. If it is just, they will follow it, be his practice what it will" (Boswell, 1958: 139). Although Johnson has a point, it is a self-serving one. For him, the moralist has no responsibility to be good, it is his followers who have a duty not to be blockheads. Lest there be any doubt that when discussing this topic Johnson is speaking specifically of himself and not merely in the abstract, he illustrates the above quote by referring directly to his own case: "No man (said Johnson) practices so well as he writes. I have all my life long been lying till noon; yet I tell all young men, and tell them with great sincerity, that nobody who does not rise early will ever do any good" (Boswell, 1958: 139).

These words were spoken when Johnson was quite an old man. When he was younger, however, and actively writing his most famous moral essays, he was a little more ambivalent about the practice of preaching what you did not, or could not, practice. There is ironic scorn and even contempt in his tone when more than twenty years earlier he points out how easy it is for the self-complacent author to promote virtue in those easy moments when not actually tempted by vice:

It is natural to mean well, when only abstracted ideas of virtue are proposed to the mind, and no particular passion turns us aside from rectitude; and so willing is every man to flatter himself, that the difference between approving laws, and obeying them, is frequently forgotten; he that acknowledges the obligations of morality, and pleases his vanity with enforcing them to others, concludes himself zealous in the cause of virtue, though he has no longer any regard to her precepts, than they conform to his own desires; and counts himself among her warmest lovers, because he praises her beauty, though every rival steals away his heart. (Johnson, *Rambler*, Vol. 2, 1979: 34)

As with all of his *Rambler* essays, Johnson was paid two guineas for writing this. Perhaps he was stung by his own criticism, for in the very next installment of his paper he seems to be attempting to defend himself from his own charges when he states "That

few men, celebrated for theoretic wisdom, live with conformity to their precepts . . . Yet since no man has power of acting equal to that of thinking, I know not whether the speculatist may not sometimes incur censures too severe . . . [being] considered as worse than others, only because he was expected to be better” (Johnson, *Rambler*, Vol 2, 1779: 40-41). In other words, being a moralist is just a job, like any other, and one so employed should not be held to a higher standard than others.

This smacks of one trying to salve a guilty conscience. Similarly, there is reason to be skeptical about the accuracy of his comment that “few men, celebrated for theoretic wisdom, live in conformity to their precepts.” In fact, just a year earlier Johnson himself seemed to think higher of moral writers when he wrote “There has often been observed a manifest and striking contrariety between the life of an author and his writings” (Johnson, *Rambler*, Vol. 1, 1779: 74). It is hard not to notice the great increase in the ratio of immoral moralists between this older pronouncement and the one quoted above (which, it might be noted, was made soon after the essay critical of those who preach virtue without practicing it): in *Rambler* 14 there are perhaps quite a few cases, whereas in *Rambler* 77 he states that there are only a few *exceptions*. In other words, in the intervening year Johnson seems to have discovered (or found it convenient to believe) that the vast majority of moralists do not practice what they preach.

In a later essay in the *Rambler* series Johnson goes so far as to become an apologist for those who sin against their own moral precepts: “It seems generally believed, that, as the eye cannot see itself, the mind has no faculties by which it can contemplate its own state, and that therefore we have not means of becoming acquainted with our real characters,” and so, as a result, “those who can distinguish with the utmost nicety the boundaries of vice and virtue, suffer them to be confounded in their own conduct” (Johnson, *Rambler*, Vol. 3, 1779: 60). This passage is not only clearly asserting radical and novel brand of latitudinarianism, but also makes the dubious claim that it is a commonly held opinion (“it is generally believed . . .”). This is a kind of slippery-slope moral theorizing that Johnson usually dismisses with contempt if not outrage.

It is difficult to accept that Johnson really believed that we cannot distinguish when we are sinning, for it directly contradicts the bulk of his teaching and would mean that we may not be responsible for our own sins, an opinion Johnson certainly does not

express elsewhere. Even supposing, however, that Johnson did believe there are subtle situations in which we might misjudge the morality of our own acts, being too close to see as it were, such a situation would not explain many of the sharp breaks between his own words and practice, which he clearly *did* recognize.

So we see that when obliquely referring to himself Johnson seems to feel that being an immoral moralist is no great fault. However, in his criticism of other writers he is less forgiving. In his *Lives of the Poets* he regularly conflates criticism of the authors writing with analyses of their lives, and frequently brings up personal failings of authors and then proceeds to use these extra-textual blemishes to cast doubts on the integrity and wholesomeness (for Johnson a key element of literary quality) of their works. This is slightly different from the position he takes in support of “vicious moralists,” but it is still inconsistent: if the quality of their actual artistry as writers is tainted by their personal moral failings, should not the validity of their moral instruction be even more suspect? The discrepancy in the two positions is clearly self-serving. It allows Johnson to take the high ground when judging other writers, but refuse the high ground to those who might judge him.

These examples show inconsistencies between Johnson’s words and practice at the theoretical level, but he was also guilty of this tendency in his day to day life. Perhaps the warmest criticisms of such inconsistencies come from his friend Hester Thrale Piozzi. She reports that “Though uncommonly ready both to give and take offence, Mr. Johnson had many rigid maxims concerning the necessity of continued softness and compliance of disposition” (Piozzi, 1897: 246). In other words, Johnson preached “complacency” and yet would himself readily attack others around him. (Recall that his surviving insults are so numerous they were collected and were able to fill a whole book!) Johnson eventually came, as age and failing health increased his own sharp irritability, to often lash out at his friend and caregiver Piozzi herself. Piozzi also reports that:

As Johnson was the firmest of believers without being credulous, so he was the most charitable of mortals without being what we call an active friend. Admirable at giving counsel, no man saw his way so clearly, but he would not stir a finger for the assistance of those to whom he was willing enough to give

advice; besides that, he had principles of laziness and could be indolent by rule . . . no force could urge him to diligence, no importunity could conquer his resolution of standing still. (Piozzi, 1897: 279).

Piozzi gives many examples of a cavalier indifferent to the sufferings and problems of those around him, while at the same time expecting others to be very attentive to his own needs and comforts. Boswell rightfully criticizes the above passage by pointing out many examples, some in Piozzi's own book, of Johnson going to great lengths to help friends and acquaintances and even indigent strangers, but that doesn't negate the numerous cases in which he simply couldn't be bothered. It is widely agreed that Johnson, in general, had a good heart and was loved by many people because of the many good actions he performed throughout his life. However, there is also plenty of evidence that he was capable of coldness, or as Piozzi suggests above, could simply be too lazy to do what he knew was right.

Johnson's laziness was the root of many of his failures to live up to his own advice. If you add up the time when Johnson was actually working and compare it to the time in which he was doing absolutely nothing, you will find he was idle for most of his adult life, even during parts of his married life when he was young and healthy and he and his spouse were living in terrible indigence, even pawning their goods right down to his last childhood keepsakes. One would hardly imagine such behavior from a man who would so confidently assert that "If the profession which you have chosen has some unexpected inconveniences, console yourself by reflecting that no profession is without them; and that all the importunities and perplexities of business are softness and luxury, compared with the incessant cravings of vacancy, and the unsatisfactory expedients of idleness" (Boswell, 1963: 372). For being so lazy himself, Johnson was a surprisingly vocal exponent of the joys of industry and hard work.

Johnson used one excuse to explain his lapses "in good practice" that Boswell would later adopt to justify some of his own moral failings. Johnson explained to Boswell, fairly early in their acquaintance, that he "had been distressed by melancholy, and for that reason had been obliged to fly from study and meditation to the dissipating variety of life" (Boswell, 1963: 316). (Melancholy was no doubt a topic introduced by Boswell, for we find in his own journals that it is his favorite theme. On his grand tour

he asks almost everyone he meets their views on the topic.) Johnson gives Boswell some very specific advice for combating that malady: “Against melancholy he recommended constant occupation of mind, a great deal of exercise, moderation in eating and drinking, and especially to shun drinking at night. He said melancholy people were apt to fly to intemperance for relief, but that it sunk them much deeper in misery” (Boswell, 1963: 316). Interestingly, these are all practices Johnson is well known *not* to have followed: he tended to do nothing at all most of the time, got virtually no exercise, ate like a starving animal, and during the periods when he did not abstain completely from alcohol, drank heavily, often alone (presumably at night). In other words, every practice Johnson recommends to Boswell refers to either a bad habit which Johnson himself indulged in but was unable to break, or a good habit which he did not practice.

Many of the above recommendations had to do with behaviors that were habitual, and which Johnson lacked the will-power to refrain from. However, Johnson’s strange inconsistency regarding exercise, fresh air, and pastoral beauty does not fall into this category. He occasionally touted the benefits of the country, especially in his earlier writings, and suggested it was actually beneficial to the development of virtue. As Johnson explains, retreats into the country are necessary at times to reduce sensual temptations that exist in the city, for “A constant residence amidst noise and pleasure inevitably obliterates the impressions of piety” (Johnson, *Rambler*, Vol. 1, 1979: 40). In his *Rambler* No. 5 Johnson praises the beauty of nature in the springtime, and writes, with an air of horror, “yet there are men to whom these scenes are able to give no delight, and who hurry away from all the varieties of rural beauty, to lose their hours, and divert their thoughts by cards, or assemblies, a tavern dinner, or the prattle of the day” (Johnson, *Rambler*, Vol. 1, 1979: 27). This may sound like a couple of harmless passages, but to me they are two of Johnson’s least justifiable. Samuel Johnson hated the countryside with a passion and regularly disparaged it as a dull place full of dull people. He found it so empty and tedious that he wrote two full essays condemning pastoral poetry because, essentially, if you’ve seen one haystack you’ve seen them all. What makes this worse is that the things Johnson denigrates, “assemblies, a tavern dinner,” even “the prattle of the day,” were just the things he most enjoyed. Johnson famously called a chair in a tavern “the seat of human felicity.” Not only did Johnson

avoid the country, in private life he even denied its health benefits. Piozzi writes that “Though Dr. Johnson owed his very life to air and exercise, given him when his organs of respiration could scarcely play, in the year 1766, yet he ever persisted in the notion, that neither of them had any thing to do with health” (Piozzi, 1897, 288). It should be noted here that, although this is pre-industrial England, the air in London was notoriously polluted by the burning of coal for all heating and cooking, as well as being extremely noisome due to inadequate systems of waste disposal.

Certainly many of these details do not paint a pretty picture of Samuel Johnson. Although it is hard not to call Johnson’s inconsistencies hypocrisy, his defenders can point to various extenuating circumstances in his defense. As we have seen, Johnson knew he did not follow his own precepts. He had a genius for preaching morality, and hoped by this way to save others from committing the errors that he understood so deeply, having himself given them deep and intense thought during his vain attempts at combating them. If Johnson felt qualms about making money by preaching what he did not practice, he might still have had little chance of making a living by doing anything else. He failed as a teacher, and because of his physical irregularities may not have been able to get any other work besides writing. He had worked long as a Grub Street hack, and had only barely been able to keep a roof over his head. More than once he was offered a good job in the ministry if he would only take holy orders, but knowing what we do about Johnson’s failings I think it is to his credit that he turned these down. It is probable that the only work Johnson was fit for was writing, and to publish during this time period it was necessary for one’s work to have a moral, prescriptive component. “The voices of eighteenth-century Britons echoing down to us today are voices of *should* and *ought*. Many writers adopted the voice of obligation unquestioningly and greedily; others turned ironic in giving advice. Even persons burdened by intense self-doubt adopted it. It seems they needed to, in order to be heard at all” (Vermeule, 2000: 2). If he could help others find the path of virtue that he himself had lost, should that be called a sin?

On the other hand, we should not dismiss the longer term ramifications of this kind of practice. The separation that often exists between moral profession and moral practice, with vocal professions of morality often salving the guilt and discomfort that *should* be caused by self-interested and exploitative practices, paves the way for much

evil, and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the golden age of such practices. The widespread tendency to permit merely professing goodness to substitute for humane actions has allowed the whole Anglo-American cultural sphere to perpetrate a large body of social evils while holding its collective head self-righteously high and Samuel Johnson was a prominent part of that movement.

REFERENCES

- Bate, W. J. (1998), *Samuel Johnson*, Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint.
- Boswell, J. (1925), *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D. in Three Volumes* ed. Roger 1925: Boston: Lauriat.
- Boswell, J. (1958), *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons.
- Boswell, J. (1963), *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D. in Three Volumes (With Marginal Comments and Markings by Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi)*. New York: The Heritage Press
- Boswell, J. (1979), *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Ed. Christopher Hibbert. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Boswell, J. (1991), *The Journals of James Boswell 1762-1795*, Ed. John Wain. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Brady, F. (1984), *James Boswell: The Later Years 1769-1795*. New York: McGraw.
- Burney, F. (2001), *Journals and Letters*. London: Penguin.
- Clifford, J. L. (1955), *Young Sam Johnson*. New York: McGraw.
- Durant, W. and A. Durant (1965), *The Story of Civilization: Part IX: The Age of Voltaire*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Durant, W. and A. Durant (1975), *The Story of Civilization: Part X: The Age of Napoleon*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hibbert, C. (1979), "Introduction," *The Life of Johnson*. Ed. Christopher Hibbert. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Hunter, P. J. (1990), *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century Fiction*, New York: Norton.
- Johnson, S. (1941), *Lives of the English Poets Volume I*. London: Dent.
- Johnson, S. (1961), *Lives of the English Poets Volume II*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons.
- Johnson, S. (1963), *The Idler and the Adventurer*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Johnson, S. (1979), *The Rambler*. (3 Volumes) New Haven: Yale UP.
- Johnson, S. (1986), *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Macaulay, T. B. (1951), *Critical and Historical Essays: Volume 2*. London: Dent.
- Piozzi, H. L. (1897), "Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., During the Last Twenty Years of His Life" Ed. George Birbeck Hill. *Johnsonian Miscellanies*

Vol. I. Clarendon: Oxford.

Vermeule, B. (2000), *The Party of Humanity: Writing Moral Psychology in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Wain, J. (1974), *Samuel Johnson*. London: Macmillan.

Watt, I. (1957), *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Berkeley: U of CP.

暢談道德言論的不道德之徒：賽繆爾·強森

王亞倫*

摘要

在早期現代時期，大不列顛唯一最受歡迎的寫作格式，很顯然，是以宗教為主題，教誨為意圖 (Hunter, 225) 的寫作格式。同時期裡，也隨著工業革命及殖民主義興盛，導致不論是國內或國際上，對其他民族大肆剝削利用。然而，那時期的全國人民卻言行不一地以閱讀大量的道德書，小冊子作為自我修身的工具。在當時，這種的道德虛偽儼然成為一個國家的顯著的特點。

其中最受推崇的道德作家－賽繆爾·強森，就有一系列集結短篇成冊、眾所皆知的道德刊物－漫談者 (The Rambler)。也因為這一本刊物，使得當代大多數的作家，想當然認定賽繆爾·強森就是美德的楷模。然而，從他的日誌及無數的自傳裡，在在的顯示，他只是一個滿口道德經的不道德家。在此，我在我的論文裡舉証並歸類了賽繆爾·強森的道德沉淪及列舉他所觸犯七大原罪中的任何一條戒律。藉由檢視賽繆爾·強森的漫談者 (The Rambler) 及友人的回憶錄，來証實他其實是一個言行不一，一生做盡違反自身所暢談道德言論的不道德之徒。因此，著名的強森時代中，賽繆爾·強森不只以他正面的，極具機智並博學的楷模形象；也以大力推崇其一「行為」但自己卻做著反其道而行的不道德行為來塑造這個他所高談闊論的時代，也因如此，為英格蘭往後在殖民主義及資本主義猖狂囂張行徑下鋪了一條康莊大道。

關鍵詞：山繆爾·強森、道德寫作、十八世紀大不列顛、道德敗壞

* 作者為南臺科技大學應用英語系助理教授，E-mail: awalzem@gmail.com。