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The Wisdom of Samuel Johnson

J.B. Jones

Abstract

Aside from his famous Dictionary, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) is well-known for “London: A Poem,” “The Rambler,” “The Idler,” and “Rasselas.” This essay will deal mainly with his popular writings in “The Rambler,” “The Adventurer,” “The Idler” and “The Sermons.” It will also present selections from these writings in an attempt to show that Johnson’s wisdom is still applicable to problems that humans have always faced and still confront today. Though his behavior and beliefs have often been described as odd by some witnesses, he was in essence a highly moral man who described the world with a clear vision, seldom matched by other writers in the English language, except perhaps Shakespeare. So in many of his writings, such as “The Rambler,” his stated purpose was to “clear it (The English language) from (sic) colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations” (Rambler 208). This was possibly Johnson’s language experiment and a bold one to undertake—much like his Dictionary.

“...he that recalls the attention of mankind to any part of learning which time has left behind it, may be truly said to advance the literature of his own age.”

(Johnson; Idler 55)

I. The Sermons

These were published in 1788-1789. Only two were published in Johnson’s lifetime. They were written for friends, primarily for John Taylor. Johnson was a deeply religious man, and the thoughts he discusses in the surviving twenty-eight of the over forty essays he wrote cover a wide range of spiritual concerns. What follows is a mere selection.

It should be borne in mind by the reader that Johnson himself has commented on the futility of

trying to represent the thought of a man by presenting a selection of that thought in a series of quotations. In an apt simile, Johnson says that, for example, trying to show what a play by Shakespeare is like by quoting excerpts at length is like “the pedant in Hierocles, who, when he offered his house for sale, carried a brick in his pocket as a specimen” (justus. anglican.org; pg 6).

1. Fear

In Sermon number three, Johnson distinguishes between two types of fear: “filial” fear, which is a fear of giving offense to one’s fellow man, and “servile” fear, which is a fear of punishment. Johnson was a strict moralist and believed that any sort of vice should be punished. So it would seem that “servile” fear was uppermost in Johnson’s mind, although because he was so social, he probably experienced “filial” fear at times.

Belief in religion itself can cause a kind of fear, the kind that keeps its followers away from vice (or is intended to), but at a price:

...the religion which makes fear the great principle of action, implicitly condemns all self-confidence, all presumptuous security; and enjoins a constant state of vigilance and caution, a perpetual distrust of our own hearts, a full conviction of our natural weakness, and an earnest solicitude for divine assistance.

(Sermon 3)

The price paid in loss of self-confidence is a gain for humility and charity; presumption is itself to be shunned, vigilance aroused. Most important for Johnson was the element of hope in “divine assistance.” Distrust of one’s own heart, however, is something no longer highly to be wished for, if ever in history. The importance of religion to Johnson is perhaps central to his thinking. He forecasts dire consequences for those who shun religion. He felt those in the “common modes of life” (ibid.), “find that business ensnares, and that pleasure seduces; that success produces pride” (ibid.); even the care we have for our friends and family “generates contest and competition, enmity and malevolence, and at last fills the mind with secular solitude” (ibid.). That this is a sort of punishment and something to be feared seems his apparent meaning here. This is the same man who uttered the famous phrase, “He who is tired of London, is tired of life.” His need for companionship in order to avoid boredom was intense.

About pleasure, he warns of its end by saying that:

The slave of pleasure soon sinks into a kind of voluptuous dotage; intoxicated by present delights, and careless of everything else; his days and his nights glide away in luxury or in vice, and he has no cure, but to keep thought away, for thought is always troublesome to

him, who lives without his own approbation.

(*ibid.*)

1.1 Compassion

In many ways Samuel Johnson's thought anticipates that of George Eliot; the power of godliness and virtue in the soul are clear to Johnson, as to all good Christians: the soul is most clear and focused when "the power of godliness appears in behavior which displays a readiness to help the weak, to look with compassion upon the frail, to rekindle those whose ardour is cooling" (Sermon 13) and to "favour all them who mean well, and wish to be better..." (*ibid.*). Though Eliot was not as committed as Johnson to formal religion, considering that she lived in an age when the discoveries of Darwin had shaken formal religious belief in many ways. However, the two great writers share an understanding of virtue and especially, of compassion.

Compassion for the suffering of others was always a central idea in Johnson's thinking and he demonstrated his charity for others repeatedly throughout his life. Charity can be practiced by all, not just the rich. If a man has little wealth to give, he can still give to others:

He that cannot relieve the poor, may instruct the ignorant; and he that cannot attend the sick, may reclaim the vicious. He that can give little assistance himself, may yet perform the duty of charity by inflaming the ardour of others....

(Sermon 4)

Finally, Johnson cautions us to remember that "Every call to charity is a gift of God, to be received with thankfulness, and improved by diligence" (Sermon 11).

1.2 Marriage and Friendship

Johnson's married life was not ideal; his wife "Tetty" was an alcoholic and an opium addict who died of these substances. He loved her devotedly it is clear, probably because of her faults, not in spite of them. The goodness in Johnson is responsible for his great loyalty to her.

For Johnson, perhaps the following quote is appropriate; that marriage "...sometimes condenses the gloom, which it was intended to dispel, and encreases (*sic*) the weight, which was expected to be made lighter by it..." (Sermon 1). Johnson saw marriage as a kind of friendship. It was a friendship "which no change of fortune, nor any alteration of external circumstances can be allowed to interrupt

or weaken” (ibid.). This friendship however, should be confined to one person: for “he that hath friends, hath no friend” (ibid.). That Tetty was so different from Johnson in temperament seems obvious. His own advice about marriage between people of dissimilar educations and backgrounds is sobering. A “...difference of education produces differences of habits, sentiments, and inclinations” (ibid.) and this finally results in contrary views, the consequences of which are “injustice, disgust, alienation, and settled hatred” (ibid.). That he never hated Tetty seems marvelous given the above quote, and shows his great compassion.

Johnson’s friendship for his wife can be favorably compared to the deep feelings he had for his many friends. For him, “Virtue is the first quality to be considered in the choice of a friend” (ibid.).

The purpose of love must be clear to all: forgiveness, He who forgives is himself forgiven by others. This is true not only with family and friends, but by extension true of all those in the world, for “one of the chief acts of love is readily to forgive errors, and overlook defects. Neglect is to be reclaimed by kindness, and perverseness softened by compliance. Sudden starts of passion are patiently to be borne, and the calm moments of recollection silently expected” (ibid).

1.3 Vanity and Other Sins

Johnson is not hopeful about the human condition. Happiness, or many men’s conception of it, seems to him difficult to achieve. For “if happiness had been to be found, some would have found it, and it is vain to search for what all have missed” (Sermon 12). This is largely our own fault. All of man’s labors are uncertain, and also “imperfect” for “If we perform what we designed, we yet do not obtain what we expected. What appeared great when we desired it, seems little when it is obtained; the wish is still unsatisfied, and something always remains behind, without which, the gratification is always incomplete. He that rises to greatness finds himself in danger; he that obtains riches, perceives that he cannot gain esteem. He that is caressed, sees interest lurking under kindness; and he that hears his own praises, suspects that he is flattered. Discontent and doubt are always pursuing us” (ibid).

In the same sermon Johnson says, “Friendship is violated by interest, or broken by passion, and benevolence finds its kindness bestowed on the worthless and ungrateful” (ibid.). Yet Johnson was a great humanitarian; he personally supported a number of other people financially and morally and further indirectly helped to support many more of London’s poor.

In Sermon 16, Johnson gives his concept of God as a perfect source, for “...heaven and earth, and the whole system of things, were created by an infinite and perfect Being, who still continues to superintend and govern them...this great Being is infinitely wise, and infinitely good; so that the end which He proposes must necessarily be the final happiness of those beings that depend upon him, and the means, by which He promotes that end, must undoubtedly be the wisest and best” (Sermon 16). But man’s behavior is suspect because he denies the needs of others: for example, some men “while

they see the anguish of misery, and hear the cries of want, can pass by without pity, and without regard: and without even feeling any reproaches from their hearts, (they) pray to God for that mercy, which they have themselves denied to their fellow beings” (Sermon 19). But one of the greatest transgressions for Johnson is idleness, (though he himself seldom rose from bed until the afternoon), he has called idleness “the root of vice” (Sermon 26).

II. The Rambler

This periodical was published for two years (1750-1752) and had no fixed theme or point-of-view. Topics range from “Anger” (R 11) to “Women As Enemies” (R 199). Johnson seems almost Greek in his belief in a middle course in life: “Evil is uncertain in the same degree as good, and for the same reason that we ought not to hope too sincerely, we ought not fear with too much dejection” (R 30). One great fear is the loss of money; he is always aware of the need for care with money, because “He whom the wantonness of abundance has once softened, easily sinks into neglect of his affairs; and he that thinks he can afford neglect, is not far away from being poor” (R 40). Money aside, “We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure” (R 60).

2. In life “We proceed, because we have begun; we complete our design, that the labor may not be in vain” (R 207). But again we must be cautious because, “It is a hopeless endeavour to unite the contraries of spring and winter; it is unjust to claim the privileges of age, and retain the play-things of childhood” (R 51). To be avoided most determinedly is inconstancy, of which Johnson himself was sometimes guilty in his habits, but never in his friendships. For Johnson, “...men may be made inconstant by virtue or by vice; by too much or too little thought; yet inconstancy however dignified its motive, is always to be avoided, because life allows us but a small time for enquiry and experiment, and he that steadily endeavours at excellence, in whatever employment, will more benefit mankind than who he hesitates choosing his part till he is called to the performance. The traveler that resolutely follows a rough and winding path, will sooner reach the end of his journey, than he that is always changing his direction and wastes the hours of daylight in looking for smoother ground, and shorter passages” (R 64).

Of the many paradoxes of life he notes that “In youth we require something of the tardiness and frigidity of age; and in age, we must labour to recall the fire and impetuosity of youth; in youth we must learn to expect, and in age to enjoy” (R 111). His sarcasm is clear when it comes to money though, he says “that the race of man may be divided in a political estimate between those who are practicing fraud, and those who are repelling it” (R 131)—the choice of verb is most interesting. While men are practicing fraud on each other, there are other forces at work in the universe; Johnson is somber when he says,

Let him who peruses this paper, review the series of his life, and enquire how he was placed in his present condition. He will find that of the good or ill that he has experienced, a great part came unexpected, without any visible gradations of approach; that every event has been influenced by causes acting without his intervention; and that whenever he pretended to the prerogative of foresight, he was mortified with a new conviction of the shortness of his views.

(R 184)

This force for Johnson is of course a Supreme Deity. His view of man is a complex one and hard to describe. He seems to understand that man is an actor playing a part, or appears to be one. That the face that a man presents to the world and the secrets of the heart may be worlds apart. Young people who have had little experience of life are especially warned, "He who has seen only the superficialities of life believes everything to be what it appears, and rarely expects that external splendour conceals any latent sorrow or vexation. He never imagines that there may be greatness without safety, affluence without content, jollity without friendship, and solitude without peace" (R 196).

His need for religion to bolster his will in the fight against melancholy caused by the fear of disease and death was great and led to such declarations as, "...the condition of humanity admits no pure and unmingled happiness; that the exuberant gaiety of youth end in poverty and disease; that uncommon qualifications and contrarities of excellence, produce envy equally with applause" (ibid.).

Johnson refused to learn other languages than English. This may seem somewhat odd in the international age in which we live, but he has some sound reasons; one of them was, "I believe that whoever knows the English tongue in its present extent, will be able to express his thoughts without further help from other nations" (R 208).

III. The Adventurer

This periodical, which was inspired by "The Rambler" was a joint undertaking; Johnson himself only wrote 29 numbers for the paper, Numbers 29 through 138. The rest were written by various other authors, including one that copied Johnson's style and tone so well that there is still some dispute as to which essays were really Johnson's.

3. The Spirit

One of Johnson's strongest statements for a belief in an immortal soul is to be found in Adventurer 120:

The miseries of life, may, perhaps, afford some proof of a future state, compared as well with the mercy and the justice of God. It is scarcely to be imagined, that Infinite Benevolence would create a being capable of enjoying so much more than is here to be enjoyed, and qualified by nature to prolong pain by remembrance and anticipate it by terror, if he was not designed for something nobler and better than a state, in which he is importuned by desires that can never be satisfied, to feel many evils which he has no power to avoid, and to fear many which he will never feel: there will surely come a time, when every capacity of happiness shall be filled, and none shall be wretched but by his own fault.

(A 120)

As usual with Johnson, his pessimism about the present and his reliance on the Christian idea of hope are quite clear in this quotation; whether he is simply discussing the soul and its future state in Heaven, or he is referring to, by extension, a future state here on earth once we have been perfected by God, is unclear. He is perhaps recommending perfectibility here and now, or a beginning toward a more perfect state for life here on earth. Human relationships were of utmost importance to Johnson and he spent many hours meditating on man's treatment of his fellow man. He felt knowledge was important but that knowledge learned in solitude and not employed in an exchange of ideas with others is a waste of intellectual effort. But he warns us that singularity, being different, which is often a result of solitude is dangerous:

Singularity is, I think, in its own nature universally and invariably displeasing; in whatever respect a man differs from others, he must be considered by them as either worse or better. By being better, it is well-known that a man gains admiration oftener than love, since all approbation of his practice must necessarily condemn him that gives it; and though a man oftener pleases by inferiority, there are few who desire to give such pleasure. Yet the truth is, that singularity is always regarded as a brand of slight reproach; and where it is associated with acknowledged merit, serves as an abatement or an ally of excellence, by which weak eyes are reconciled to its luster, and by which though kindness is not gained, at least envy is averted.

(A 130)

But self-improvement through study is what Johnson expects of every right-minded individual. His own efforts at self-improvement through learning began at an early age, despite physical (scrofula) and mental (depression) handicaps, he persevered, and he expected it of others. He recommends study because of its ease and especially because of its independent nature, the

solitariness of it: "...the most general and prevalent reason of study (sic), the impossibility of finding amusement equally cheap or constant, equally independent (of) on the hour or the weather" (A 137). Books to Johnson, who was almost blind and could read only with a book held close to his one good eye, were everything. For him they held the potential for mystery and the element of originality necessary to a most original mind. He says, "Books always have a secret influence on the understanding...he that reads books of science, though without any fixed desire for improvement, will grow more knowing; he that entertains himself with moral or religious treatises, will imperceptibly advance in goodness; the ideas which are often offered to the mind, will at last find a lucky moment when it is disposed to receive them" (ibid.). It should be noted that Johnson's concept of the word "entertain" is quite different from our own today. In the age of television, entertainment has come to mean a sort of abstraction from reality—an avoidance of any real thought; a mindless numbness of sensibility, or an overexcited reliance on novelty and thrills. In Johnson's time the meaning was simply to divert the mind agreeably. In his day this meant reading and conversation—mostly the latter for most people, but not for Johnson. Books supplied a need he felt that was as strong as the need for food or sleep.

IV. The Idler

This periodical was published from 1758-1760. Its tone and approach are much less serious than "The Rambler"; it is less didactic and more humorous. Though Johnson's era generally and London in that age were less stressful than, say, living in New York City today, time was still an important commodity. And the wasting of another man's time was even then a sin against society and especially against the individual. The great moralist cautions the reader against this social mistake:

If we will have the kindness of others, we must endure their follies; he, who cannot persuade himself to withdraw from society, must be content to pay a tribute of his time to a multitude of tyrants; to the loiterer, who makes appointments which he never keeps; to the consulter, who asks advice which he never takes; to the boaster, who blusters only to be praised; to the complainer, who whines only to be pitied; to the projector, whose happiness is to entertain his friends with expectations which all but himself know to be vain; to the economist, who tells of bargains and settlements; to the politician, who predicts the fate of battles and breach of alliances; to the usurer, who compares the different finds; to the talker, who talks only because he loves to be talking.

(Idler 14)

Even worse is the boor who imposes on the sensibility and feelings of others in a selfish manner;

he is one who commits the gravest of sins against his fellow man. We must consider others first, always, "...if all would seriously reflect, that whoever pays a visit that is not desired, or talks longer than the hearer is willing to attend, is guilty of an injury which he cannot repair, and takes away that which he cannot give" (ibid.). Many things are replaceable, but time and life itself can never be replaced. Once they pass, they pass; we don't even notice them going in many cases.

Johnson thought time was a weight, as was money, and the unhappiest of people are those who have too much of either, or worse, both: "...money and time are the heaviest burthens of life, and the unhappiest of all mortals are those who have more of either than they know how to use" (I 30). Of course Johnson's concept of time is much more complex than the simple paradox that time is both a burden and a precious resource. But what appears to be a paradox is not really one; what is of real importance and of use we carry with a heavy heart. Johnson's pessimism allowed him to see this; of course many people do not feel this way about time, but the English language is full of expressions about time which support the view that it is precious but that it is also a problem: we "waste" or "save" time; we also "kill" time— perhaps the clearest example is the famous "time is money." So self-control becomes of supreme importance. This is a form of self-denial, precisely speaking. The Doctor has said, "No man, whose appetites are his masters, can perform the duties of his nature with strictness and regularity; he that would be superior to external influences must first become superior to his own passions" (I 52).

No matter how important time and money may be, man ultimately seeks, once his basic needs are satisfied, a transformation of his consciousness, which Johnson acknowledges; some people find conscious happiness in the company of others, others find it in solitude, but the end is the same. Some need quiet, "Others are afraid to be alone, and amuse themselves by a perpetual succession of companions, but the difference is not great; in solitude we have our dreams to ourselves, in company we agree to dream in concert. The end sought in both is forgetfulness of ourselves" (I 32).

4.1 Obligation

This theme is a constant with Johnson; it runs through much of "The Rambler" and "Idler." Our duties to each other have been discussed earlier in this paper, and one of the obligations we have to others is to add to the good of the whole, to contribute something:

Everyone is obliged by the supreme master of the universe to improve all the opportunities for good which are afforded him. But he has no reason to repine though his abilities are small and his opportunities few. He that has improved the virtue or advanced the happiness of one fellow-creature, he that has ascertained a simple moral proposition, or added one useful experiment to human knowledge, may be contented with his own performance, and, with respect to mortals like himself, may demand, like Augustus, to be dismissed at his

departure with applause.

(Idler 88)

This approach to the theme of doing good to and for others is a constant preoccupation of Johnson's, and many witnesses attest that he carried his beliefs into action, that he was a benefactor, though his own means were small, (if not non-existent at times), to many others, both in his class, and outside it. But he was also a dependent, as the Pirozzi family connection reveals; the rich brewer was his benefactor. So Johnson was well aware of both sides of obligation.

Man's highest obligation, of course, is learning. This theme is a constant too throughout Johnson's writings. He explains its excellence:

It is the great excellence of learning that it borrows very little from time or place; it is not confined to season or to climate, to cities or to the country, but may be cultivated and enjoyed where no other pleasure can be obtained. But this quality, which constitutes much of its value, is one occasion of neglect; what may be done at all times with equal propriety, is deferred from day to day, till the mind is gradually reconciled to the omission, and the attention is turned to other objects.

Thus habitual idleness gains too much power to be conquered, and the soul shrinks from the idea of intellectual labour and intenseness of meditation.

(Idler 94)

Activity for Johnson was especially important because he knew his time was limited. He says of death, "An even and unvaried tenour of life always hides from our apprehension the approach of its end" (I 103). Johnson's fear of death was well-known, but his end is not the concern of this paper.

It is enough that this half-blind, sick and often handicapped man managed to achieve what he did in this life. Only think of what he could have achieved had he been well. But then, he would not be the same Samuel Johnson, the "Doctor."