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A Symposium on Adam Potkay,
The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume

Christian Johnson and Pagan Hume

WILLIAM R. CONNOLLY

It is a pleasure to be able to pay tribute to Adam Potkay's interesting and impressive book on two of the most important figures in the eighteenth century.¹ It brings together the philosophical and the literary, the "anatomist" and the "painter" of the passions and the moral life, integrating worlds that, however isolated they may have become in the twentieth century, were not seen as all that distinct in the eighteenth. Having said this, the most remarkable feature of Potkay's book is that it unites two figures usually thought to be opposed—the irascible, domineering, and deeply Christian Johnson and the dispassionate, moderate, and pagan Hume.

Potkay's study exhibits a clear appreciation for the unified structure and purpose of Hume's work, the program of the science of human nature, from the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries* to the moral, political, historical, and economic essays. For the philosophical community he has nicely highlighted the contributions of Johnson as a moralist, drawing our attention to the philosophical underpinnings of Johnson's literary work in *Rasselas* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* as well as the relevant essays from *The Rambler*, *The Adventurer*, and *The Idler*.

Finally, he draws attention to the historical importance in this period of the influence of Cicero, whose philosophical works provided not only a stylistic model much admired by Hume, but also a substantive moral contribution in the form of Cicero's eclectic, somewhat skeptical and Romanized stoicism.

One may view Potkay's work as an attempt to answer the following questions. Why have Johnson and Hume traditionally been seen as antagonists?

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How does this traditional account blind us to the substantial areas of underlying agreement between them? And, what are these areas of agreement? After examining these questions, I would like to conclude by suggesting that in some fundamental ways this project of reconciliation has important limitations, due in large part to religious differences to which both Johnson and Boswell draw attention.

I suspect my experience of Johnson has been fairly typical for philosophers. What we know about Samuel Johnson is pretty much limited to knowing him as the author of the great dictionary and, more likely, as the witty, irascible, even arrogant conversationalist who emerges in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Indeed, it is probably rare for philosophers, even those interested in the eighteenth century, to read Johnson and certainly not for the purposes of mining philosophical gems. (I thank Professor Potkay for getting me at least to start some of this reading.)

When one turns to Boswell for references to those occasions when Johnson speaks about Hume, in nearly every case we are confronted with hostility both to the ideas and the person of Hume. Consider this gem from Boswell's account of a conversation on July 20, 1763.²

Of a gentleman who was mentioned, he said, "I have not met with any man for a long time who has given me such general displeasure in his principles, and wants to puzzle other people." I [BOSWELL] said his principles had been poisoned by a noted infidel writer [Hume], but that he was, nevertheless, a benevolent good man. [JOHNSON:] We can have no dependence from that instinctive, that constitutional goodness which is not founded on principle. I grant you that such a man may be a very amiable member of society. I can conceive him placed in such a situation that he is not much tempted to deviate from what is right; and as every man prefers virtue, when there is not some strong incentive to transgress its principles, I can conceive of him doing nothing wrong. But if such a man stood in need of money, I should not like to trust him; and I should certainly not trust him with young ladies, for there is always temptation. [One might hazard a guess that Johnson is providing advice to Boswell himself!] Hume, and other skeptical innovators, are vain men, and will gratify themselves at any expense. Truth will not afford sufficient food for their vanity; so they have betaken themselves to error. Truth, Sir, is a cow which will yield such people no more milk, and so they are gone to milk the bull. If I could have allowed myself to gratify my vanity at the expense of truth, what fame might I have acquired.

Assuming that the earlier portion of these comments refers to that certain "gentleman" and not to Hume, Johnson's comments are unkind, not to say unfair. They certainly don't reflect a careful consideration of Hume's views.

Moreover, in Johnson's view, Hume's arguments against Christianity were neither ultimately damaging nor especially original. Again, commenting on Hume, Johnson boasted, "Everything which Hume has advanced against Christianity had passed through my mind long before he wrote."³

Regarding Hume's arguments against miracles, Johnson claimed:⁴

Why, Sir, the great difficulty of proving miracles should make us cautious in believing them. But let us consider; although God has made Nature to operate by certain fixed laws, yet it is not unreasonable to think that he may suspend those laws in order to establish a system highly advantageous to mankind. Now the Christian religion is a most beneficial system, as it gives us light and certainty where we were before in darkness and doubt. The miracles which prove it are attested by men who had no interest in deceiving us. . . . Then, Sir, when we take the proofs derived from prophecies which have been so exactly fulfilled, we have most satisfactory evidence.

It seems that Johnson's remarks display little real understanding of Hume's arguments, and fail to consider the criticisms of natural religion that immediately follow and are intimately connected with Hume's discussion of miracles. In other places views are attributed to Hume that he does not hold, an unfortunate practice of Hume's contemporary critics. (Hume does not deny or doubt, for example, that every event has a cause. As Potkay points out, he means to question rationalist accounts of that principle.)

Perhaps the most psychologically revealing of Johnson's comments on Hume deal with each of their respective attitudes toward death. Here is Boswell's account.⁵

When we were alone, I introduced the subject of death, and endeavored to maintain that the fear of it might be got over. I told him that David Hume said to me, he was no more uneasy to think that he should not be after his death, than that he had not been before he began to exist. [JOHNSON:] Sir, if he really thinks so, his perceptions are disturbed; he is mad; if he does not think so, he lies. He may tell you, he holds his finger in the flame of a candle, without feeling pain; would you believe him? When he dies, he at least gives up all he has.

Later, after Hume's death, Boswell remarked how shocked he was to find Hume persisting in his infidelity even as he was dying.⁶

[BOSWELL:] I said, I had reason to believe that the thought of annihilation gave Hume no pain. [JOHNSON:] It was not so, Sir. He had a vanity in being thought easy. It is more probable that he should assume an appearance of ease, then that so very improbable a thing should be, as a man not afraid of going . . . into an unknown state.

Perhaps Johnson's own well known fear of death made it difficult for him to marshal any sympathy for the Scottish infidel, but it seems hardly fair to resort to what appears to be *ad hominem* argument.

It is hard to imagine two figures so different, personally as well as philosophically. As Mossner noted,⁷

In temperament the Scotsman was serene, courteous, and dispassionate; the Englishman, irritable, magisterial, and disputatious. In debate Hume talked to discuss, Johnson talked to win; Hume was reserved, Johnson was domineering; Hume insinuated, Johnson bludgeoned. The arguments of the one were always rational and philosophical; his rebuttals evidential; the arguments of the other were frequently emotional and subjective, his rebuttals retaliatory.

Furthermore, their ideas seemed, at least on the surface, equally dissimilar. One the infidel, after a fashion, the skeptic who found the moral influences of religion to be pernicious, the other the orthodox Christian, the authoritarian who found religion to be an indispensable ingredient in the virtuous and happy life. To counter this long held view of their difference and to do so persuasively is no small accomplishment on Potkay's part.

Can all these apparent differences be discounted, or at least minimized? On Potkay's view they can at least be minimized. The principle source for the belief in their opposition is, of course, Boswell, whose testimony is not to be altogether trusted in all particulars. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is less a record of Johnson's life than, in Potkay's phrase, "a creative representation" (PFH 1) of conversations that took place in the last ten years of Johnson's life. Indeed, Boswell sets him up. He frequently misrepresents Hume's views and baits Johnson; he goads him into assuming his familiar pose of verbal attack. The questions posed and the manner in which they are posed as much reflect the ambiguity in Boswell's own attitude toward Hume. On the one hand, he was attracted to his fellow Scot as "a very proper person for a young man to

cultivate an acquaintance with." He was much taken with both the work and person of Hume. On the other hand, Hume's reputation as the great infidel may have been more troubling for Boswell than for Johnson. How could he be, as he seemed, the quintessentially virtuous man and yet persist in his religious skepticism? Indeed, it was Boswell, more than Johnson, who was troubled and perplexed by Hume's calm resignation in the face of death. Boswell's interview of Hume shortly before his death is instructive here. They discussed a number of things, especially immortality and religion. Hume reiterated his disbelief in life after death, expressed resignation toward his own annihilation and offered that he had not seriously entertained any religious belief since reading Locke and Clarke. Boswell refers to Hume saying "that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded that he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious." With classic understatement, Boswell concluded his report of the interview noting, "I left him with impressions which disturbed me for some time."

In view of the less than ideal evidence provided by Boswell, Potkay's tactic is to stick to the writings of Johnson and Hume from which a much different picture emerges. I cannot do justice to the care with which he has examined the material and will limit my remarks to just a few of those things I find most interesting.

First, and perhaps foremost, both Johnson and Hume reject Cartesian rationalism. Hume's attack on the pretensions of reason (in the rationalist sense) requires no lengthy discussion. Suffice it to say that Hume deserves the title of undertaker of the age of reason, attacking as he does the claims of reason to provide the foundation for knowledge, ethics, and politics as well as religion. Indeed, the persistence of Hume's attack gives whatever credence there is to the charge that in all these matters Hume is the skeptic, the doubter. Yet as Hume remarked,⁸

All he [Hume] means by these Scruples is to abate the Pride of mere human Reasoners, by showing them, that even with regard to Principles which seem the clearest, and which they are necessitated from the strongest Instincts of Nature to embrace, they are not able to attain a full Consistence [confidence] and absolute Certainty. Modesty, then, and Humility, with regard to the Operations of our natural Faculties, is the Result of Skepticism, not an universal Doubt, which it is impossible for any man to support.

Johnson is part of an important literary tradition equally critical of the pretensions of reason. He uses the satirical travel story in *Rasselas* to much

the same end as Swift did in *Gulliver's Travels* (my personal favorite). As the schemes of the Royal Society were lampooned in Book III of *Gulliver*, so abstract schemes for flying are satirized in *Rasselas*. As the moral life of pure reason is no fit life for humans (I take this to be the lesson of Book IV of *Gulliver*), leaving out as it does those particular affections for others that provide the basis for the natural virtues, so a purely rationalistic ethics based on "the fitness arising from the relations and qualities of causes and effects; to concur with the great and unchangeable scheme of universal felicity" leaves *Rasselas* concluding "that this was one of the sages whom he should understand less as he heard him longer."⁹

An intriguing parallel, which Potkay draws between Johnson and Hume, is their mutual antipathy to Cartesian solitude as a philosophical stance. Johnson's rejection of the prospects of solitude for happiness has a distinctively Humean ring.¹⁰

I know not whether those who thus ambitiously respect the praises of solitude, have always considered how much they depreciate mankind by declaring, that whatever is excellent or desirable is to be obtained by departing from them; that the assistance we may derive from one another, is not equivalent to the evils which we have to fear.

This theme appears again in *Rasselas*, chapter 21. Commenting on his fifteen years in solitude, the hermit concludes,¹¹

I am sometimes ashamed to think that I could not secure myself from vice, but by retiring from the exercise of virtue, and begin to suspect that I was rather impelled by resentment, than led by devotion, into solitude.

On Potkay's reading, much the same lesson is to be drawn, not only from the decidedly social character of Hume's ethics, but also from the concluding discussion of Book I of the *Treatise*. Drawing on interpretations of Hume proposed by Annette Baier and Donald Livingston, the proper conclusion to Book I is not the dissolution of the self in a kind of solipsism of the present moment, but a recognition of the bankruptcy of the Cartesian self and the irremediably social character of human existence (PFH 52-8). Hume's mitigated skepticism is a rejection only of the inhuman pretensions of rationalist images of reason. As Potkay puts it, for Hume "the social instincts prove salvational" (PFH 56).

In addition, Potkay points to some striking similarities between Johnson's and Hume's accounts of the relative roles of reason and passion in the moral life. Hume's comments in this connection need no repetition here—reason as the slave of the passions, moral distinctions being based on sentiment and all that. What is worth noting is how much like Hume Johnson sounds in, for example, *The Adventurer*, number 95, where he comments on the "coincidence of sentiment."¹²

Writers of all ages have had the same sentiments, because they have in all ages had the same objects of speculation; the interests and passions, the virtues and vices of mankind, have been diversified in different times, only by unessential and casual varieties.

Potkay is reluctant to say that Johnson would endorse all that Hume says about reason and passion (nothing able to oppose a passion other than a contrary passion), yet "Johnson would be apt to rephrase Hume's law in a more pragmatic fashion: In daily life, what typically opposes or retards the impulse of passion is a contrary impulse" (PFH 48).

But even more striking is Johnson's invoking the same Newtonian analogy as Hume employed to characterize the passions of the mind (although Hume would likely give a more mechanical sound to the analogy by alluding to the laws of motion rather than the composition of light).¹³

It has been discovered by Sir Isaac Newton, that the distinct and primogential colours are only seven; but every eye can witness, that from the various mixtures in various proportions, infinite diversifications of tints may be produced. In like manner, the passions of the mind, which put the world in motion, and produce all the bustle and eagerness of the busy crowds that swarm upon the earth; the passions, from whence arise all the pleasures and pains that we see and hear of, if we analyze the mind of man, are very few; but those few agitated . . . make such frequent alterations on the surface of life.

The similarities don't end there. Potkay, for example, points to a common endorsement of "compatibilism" or "soft determinism" (long associated with Hume) as the solution to the free will problem (see PFH, chapter 6). Different as they may have been theologically, both distrusted religious zealots and their individualistic, fundamentally anti-social religious sentiments. Both acknowledge the harmful political effects of religious enthusiasm and superstition, especially the former (PFH, chapters 7 and 8). Potkay so effectively draws our

attention to these and other areas of common ground that one begins to wonder why, other than Boswell's baiting, there ever were reasons to think of Johnson and Hume as antagonists. As meticulously and persuasively as Potkay makes his case, there are some lingering doubts I have about his account.

There can be no doubt that there are some, indeed many, similarities, some more significant than others. That both politically represent a version of pre-Burkian conservatism, that both expressed a healthy concern about the political consequences of religious enthusiasm, that both were skeptical of the supposed advantages of empire, none of this should be all that surprising. They were not alone in holding these views. That both should find common ground in the conservative, eclectic outlook of Cicero would again not distinguish this pair from others in the period. So, perhaps what Potkay has drawn our attention to is an important body of opinion shared by many eighteenth-century Enlightenment figures.

The most impressive part of Potkay's case is the common ground he finds in Hume's and Johnson's conceptions of the role of reason and passion in the happy life and to me the most interesting commonality is the irreducibly social, anti-Cartesian character each assigns to the experience of human passion. Yet, impressive as all this is, one should keep in mind that here, as well, they were drawing attention to matters that were and had been central to the concerns of moralists throughout the Enlightenment period. As L. A. Selby-Bigge pointed out over a century ago, the relation between reason and sentiment in the moral life and the concern over the perceived anti-social, cynical egoism of the philosopher Hobbes and the satirist Mandeville provided the very stuff of moral philosophy. It is not surprising, then, that both Johnson and Hume concerned themselves with these matters and arrived at similar, though not identical views.

Perhaps the outstanding difference between the two is still religion. Its presence is I think central to Johnson's outlook and nearly absent from Hume's, and that difference overrides their commonalties.

To be sure, Johnson is no religious zealot, no enthusiast. Indeed, many of his essays fail to display explicitly the religious presuppositions of his moral outlook. His essays, unlike the conversations recorded by Boswell, express a spirit of tolerance and skepticism that seem out of character to those familiar only with Boswell's Johnson. (See especially *The Adventurer*, number 107.) Moreover, as Potkay acknowledges and Chester Chapin states in his *The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson*,¹⁴

It is quite possible . . . to discuss Johnson's ethical theory apart from his religious views. Starting from the premise that God has designed

man for society, Johnson is able to consider the matter simply from the point of view of what actions contribute most to the happiness of men as social beings.

When this is done, the commonalties that Potkay draws our attention to come clearly into focus.

However, the religious undercurrent of Johnson's ideas are always just below the surface. While less visible in the essays, they are more evident in both *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and *Rasselas*. For Johnson, there are no special classes of virtues, one Christian and the other pagan. For Johnson, as for other orthodox Christians in other traditions (Aquinas comes to mind), religion does not overturn the virtues of the ancient pagans. It adds to them. In the Thomistic phrase, grace doesn't negate nature, but perfects it. Charity, for example, Johnson takes to be a peculiarly Christian virtue, not derivable from the ancient virtue of benevolence. Yet charity is not an alternative to benevolence, it is a perfecting addition to it. So, that much common discussion on ethical matters can take place between Johnson and the pagan Hume is, on Johnson's view, only to be expected.

But for Johnson, all pagan systems ultimately fail to provide that support for the virtuous and happy life. They fail at precisely that point when most is demanded—when we face life's calamities. On Johnson's view, pure stoic indifference, for example, falls short at death's door. For example, consider the following passages from *The Idler*, number 41:¹⁵

Surely there is no man who, thus afflicted, does not seek succor in the Gospel, which has brought "life and immortality to light." The precepts of Epicurus, who teaches us to endure what the laws of the universe make necessary, may silence but not content us. The dictates of Zeno, who commands us to look with indifference on external things, may dispose us to conceal our sorrow, but cannot assuage it. Real alleviation of the loss of friends, and rational tranquility in the prospect of our own dissolution, can be received only from the promises of him in whose hands are life and death, and from the assurance of another and better state, in which all tears are wiped from the eyes, and the whole soul shall be filled with joy. Philosophy may infuse stubbornness, but religion only can give patience.

Similar sentiments are expressed in *The Rambler*, number 32 as well as in *Rasselas*, chapter 18.

The concluding lines of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* express a view that Johnson consistently endorsed, in his literary works, his sermons, as well as his essays—that the greatest calamity of life, which no pagan ethic can adequately face, is death. Thus, Johnson’s disbelief, not to say outrage, at Hume’s apparent serenity in the face of death is not simply motivated by his own fear. It represents a fundamental disagreement between the two on the meaning of the moral life. Johnson lives within that “porch view” of human life which Hume rejects in part 10 of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and that difference hangs over all those strictly earthly concerns about which the two are in agreement.

Potkay concludes his book with a discussion of one of the more perplexing topics dividing Johnson and Hume—the question of immortality. He sees both discussions as cloaked in ambiguity. Thus, *Rasselas* doesn’t end with Imlac’s defense of the immortality of the soul; it ends with *Rasselas* returning to the world. Nor does Hume’s essay “On the Immortality of the Soul” end with a clear statement of disbelief. Revelation assures us of “this great and important truth.”

However, I read these passages less ambiguously. *Rasselas* doesn’t take back Imlac’s argument. Returning to the world is, from a religious point of view, what should be expected. And Hume is being ironic, as he is at the end of his essay on miracles. While both Johnson and Hume would understand their attitudes toward death as an indication of a common zest for life, in the end their religious differences constitute the greatest obstacle to any rapprochement between them.

We have, however, much to learn, about Johnson, about Hume, and about the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century from Potkay’s excellent work.

NOTES

- 1 Adam Potkay, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). Page references to the book (“PFH”) are supplied in the text.
- 2 James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 314–15.
- 3 Boswell, *Life*, 314
- 4 Boswell, *Life*, 314–15.
- 5 Boswell, *Life*, 426.

- 6 Boswell, *Life*, 838-9.
- 7 Ernest Mossner, *The Forgotten Hume: Le Bon David* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 193.
- 8 "A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh," reprinted in Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), 116.
- 9 Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 88.
- 10 "Adventurer, Number 126" in Johnson, *Essays from The Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 267-8.
- 11 Johnson, *Rasselas*, 86.
- 12 In Johnson, *Essays from The Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler*, 245.
- 13 *The Adventurer*, number 95, in *Essays from the Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler*, 249.
- 14 Chester Chapin, *The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), 92.
- 15 *Essays from the Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler*, 303-4.