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

A Response to My Critics

ADAM POTKAY

In *The Passion for Happiness*, I attempt to situate Johnson alongside Hume within a common Enlightenment culture and, in so doing, to give us a better idea of what that culture is, or may be said to be.¹ I am concerned in the book to analyze what I see as their shared debts to classical eudaimonism, particularly as it is presented in the philosophical dialogues of Cicero. In this regard, my book builds upon Peter Jones's *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982); I am also deeply indebted to some recent re-interpreters of Hellenistic ethics, especially to Martha Nussbaum, Julia Annas, and Lawrence Becker. A third of my book, however, is devoted to a discussion of Johnson and Hume's roughly parallel—and, I think, mutually illuminating—careers as political writers and commentators, including the political and moral casts of their historiographical writings. The titles of chapters 7 through 9—"The Passions and Patterns of History," "Enthusiasm and Empire," "Constancy"—suggest at least my hopes that *The Passion for Happiness* might be of some interest to intellectual and political historians.

My commentators, however, are both philosophers, and as such have chosen to focus on the first half of my book, chiefly chapters 2 to 6. Within this restricted purview, William Connolly offers what I in general find to be a judicious, even a generous, assessment of my arguments. Yet while I acknowledge that it's the religious differences between Johnson and Hume that "constitute the greatest obstacle to any rapprochement between them" (Connolly 158), I would still want to emphasize, as I do in my book, that Johnson and

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Hume each tend to *write* as enlightened moralists in a Ciceronian mode. This mode tends to make Hume sound, at crucial moments in both his epistemological and historical writings, a bit more religious than he in all probability was, while it makes Johnson sound, at similar moments in his writing, a lot less religious than he almost certainly was. I can't stress enough that my primary object of inquiry is Johnson's own substantial body of writings and not the work which is, alas, much better known—Boswell's entertaining but very tendentious *Life of Johnson*. And yet the almost insuperable temptation to rely on Boswell, or to equate Boswell's Johnson with Johnson, *tout court*, is evidenced in the first part of William Connolly's comments on *The Passion for Happiness*.

This temptation is completely indulged in Peter Lopston's otherwise very useful book, *Theories of Human Nature* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995). Here, Professor Lopston deems Johnson the prototypical "conservative individualist" chiefly on the basis of several glum quips extracted from the *Life of Johnson* (92-5); Johnson is deemed the typical "Tory Christian" without any supporting evidence whatsoever. According to Lopston, Tory Christians "think of themselves as living in Babylon, part of a beleaguered minority in dark times growing darker" (50). And yet, as I show in my book, Johnson thought of himself as living in, and contributing to, an "enlightened age"—indeed, *the* enlightened age. "Our age," Johnson claimed, "is enlightened beyond any former time" (PFH 6-7). I bring up Professor Lopston's earlier characterization of Johnson because I suspect that it continues to animate his sense of who Johnson is, and of why he and Hume must, therefore, be somehow incommensurable entities. Lopston continues to think of Johnson as "dark"—as he asserts in his concluding remarks on my book, "Johnson remains a dark, glowering . . . Christian of a man" (Lopston 171)—but has yet to support this characterization with evidence, or to engage with the considerable body of contrary evidence that I provide in my book.

Indeed, Lopston is concerned less with characterizing my book than with engaging its claims or assumptions on three interrelated points of more general philosophic concern. Let me start with Lopston's second concern, the proper distinctions between types of compatibilism, simply because I can address it with the least ado. Lopston makes, I think, a very convincing case that Johnson was not a compatibilist in the way that Hume was. I've learned a good deal from this section of Professor Lopston's paper, and I thank him for the instruction.

Professor Lopston's remaining claims require more comment. First, he argues, in objection to one of my book's claims, that neither Cicero nor Hume had any signal debts to Stoic ethics. Second, against what he finds to be an

assumption of my book, Lopston argues that Hume (unlike Johnson) is not a “moral objectivist,” labeling him instead a “moral positivist” (Lopton 169).

Can Hume be related back to Stoicism of a Roman variety? Indeed, is there Stoicism of a Roman variety? With all due respect to Professor Lopston’s objections, I would still answer yes to both questions.

First, Professor Lopston asserts that “as for *happiness* as a human *telos* . . . it is an explicit and primary model for Aristotelianism and Epicureanism, not Stoicism” (Lopton 165). Of course, Stoicism is, like the other Hellenistic schools, a eudaimonistic philosophy. Roman Stoicism is, historically, an amalgam of Aristotelian and Stoic roots. E. Vernon Arnold aptly notes, “the triumph won by Panaetius [in introducing Stoicism to Rome] . . . was purchased by the sacrifice not only of its physics, but very largely of its ethics also; and the success of the new system might not unfairly be described as a victory of literature over logic, of reasonableness over reason, and of compromise over consistency. However this may be, Panaetius undoubtedly succeeded in presenting Greek philosophy to his Roman friends in a form in which it recommended itself alike to their reasoning powers and to their moral sense.”²

One of my arguments in *The Passion for Happiness* is that it is this peculiarly Roman Stoicism, as it was elaborated in several of Cicero’s dialogues, which had a significant influence on Hume and Johnson alike. We needn’t call Cicero himself a Stoic in order to acknowledge the presence of modified Stoic doctrine in his works. It’s what we find in *De Finibus* Book 3—the great discourse on Stoic ethics that Cicero puts in the mouth of Marcus Cato; it’s also what we find in *De Officiis*, which largely relies on a lost work by Panaetius.

In addressing Hume scholars, I scarcely need emphasize the importance of *De Officiis* to Hume’s ethics. But I should briefly suggest—a suggestion upon which I elaborate in my book—that the modified Stoic doctrine that we find in *De Finibus* 3 is the only type of Stoicism that makes sense of Hume’s essay “The Stoic,” and thus what Hume thinks a proper Stoic is. (Elsewhere in his writings, when Hume seeks to censure what he sees as the excesses, or the consolatory deficiencies, of Stoicism, the name he introduces is always Epictetus; even Epictetus, however, garners praise for his magnanimity in *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, section 7.) Hume’s essay “The Stoic” is, I argue, key to an understanding of Hume’s ethics.³

Through “The Stoic,” it is possible to trace a line of influence from *De Finibus* 3 to many of Hume’s—and Johnson’s—ethical themes and concerns. For the sake of brevity, simply let me list some of these baldly, with minimal adornment from Hume’s essay:

- We naturally possess radiating benevolence (as opposed to universal benevolence).
- In some way, free will and necessity—or “virtue” and “fortune”—are compatible.
- The philosopher must defend the (motivating force of the) social passions, and seek simply to “moderate the passions and enlighten the reason.”
- Reason needs particular enlightening to attain to the artificial virtue of justice.
- Special praise is due to magnanimity, “generously sacrificing ourselves for the interests of our country.”
- The love of fame is a deterrent against the fear of death.
- “The great end of all human industry is the attainment of happiness.”

The main difference between Johnson and Hume—as I point out in my book, and as William Connolly rightly underlines in his paper—is that Johnson would not concede the penultimate point here: for him, the fear of death will, at least upon the deathbed, trump all other passions. Indeed, it’s in writing about death, and pretty much only in writing about death, that Johnson the writer reveals the “porch” or “portico” view of human life that Hume scripted for Demea, and that he, personally, rejected.

I cannot fully reply to Professor Lopston’s third and final claim, concerning “moral objectivism,” because it turns, in the course of an ostensible comment on my book, into the germ of an independent and not uninteresting article, and a proper response would require at least another article in turn. Let me, however, make a few remarks as a prologomenon to any future article (it’s one that I, by the way, won’t be writing). The term “moral objectivism” is Lopston’s substitute for “moral realism,” the term he used in his oral remarks on my book at the 27th Hume Conference; the new term is no doubt intended to avoid the definitional quandaries that attend “moral realism,” but I’m not sure that it does so. “Moral realism,” I can say from my experience at the 27th Hume Conference, is a term upon whose meaning a roomful of Humeans cannot agree. Part of the problem, of course, is that it’s a term Hume never used. My own preferred definition of “moral realism,” according to which Hume can be viewed as one, was offered by Dorothy Coleman: for Hume moral distinctions are “real” in the sense of being “non-reductive,” not reducible to a radical motive such as self-interest.

The moral realism or “objectivism” that, according to Lopston, Hume opposes is “the position that there are things which are good, bad, right, wrong, obligatory, and permissible, morally” (168). Prima facie, Hume hardly seems opposed to such a position: he begins his second *Enquiry* by dismissing “those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions” as “disingenuous disputants,” adding “Let a man’s insensibility be ever so great, he must often be touched with images of Right and Wrong.”⁴ In the “Dialogue” that always accompanies the *Enquiry*, Hume reiterates that there are “universal, established principles of morals” adhered to by all but those who perversely affect “artificial lives and manners”—such as Diogenes, “the most celebrated model of extravagant philosophy,” and, much the worse, Pascal, a slave to “the illusions of religious superstition.” Pascal “made constant profession of humility and abasement, of the contempt and hatred of himself; and endeavoured to attain these supposed virtues, as far as they are attainable. The austerities of the Greek [Diogenes] were in order to inure himself to hardships, and prevent his ever suffering; Those of the Frenchman were embraced merely for their own sake, and in order to suffer as much as possible When men depart from the maxims of common reason, and affect these *artificial* lives . . . no one can answer for what will please or displease them.”⁵

Pascal possesses what Hume elsewhere in the *Enquiry* calls—contemptuously—the “monkish virtues” (section 9, part 1); readers of Hume will also recall the sustained critique of these unreal virtues in the second half of *The Natural History of Religion* and in the medieval volumes of *The History of England*. Such passages remind us that Hume is not simply or even primarily a social scientist of moral-judgment making, as Lopston avers, but a moralist, one who intends to convince his readers to abide by natural morals and to reject their perversions by religious superstition and enthusiasm. Lopston misses this point when he quotes from my book a snippet of Hume’s 1739 letter to Hutcheson, responding to a criticism Hutcheson had made about the still unpublished Book III of the *Treatise*. Hume proceeds in this letter to say that he intends, in the future, to supply that want of “Warmth in the cause of Virtue” Hutcheson had remarked in the *Treatise*: “I intend to make a new Tryal, if it be possible to make the Moralist & Metaphysician agree a little better.”⁶ I surmise that Hume’s “new Tryal” ultimately resulted in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, and that it is the work’s reconciliation of moral painting with moral anatomy that made it, as Hume opined in “My Own Life,” “of all my writings, historical, philosophical, or literary, incomparably the best.”⁷ At his self-perceived best, Hume seldom sounds like a social scientist, but rather appears as a classical moralist whose aim is human happiness:

But what philosophical truths can be more advantageous to society, than those here delivered, which represent virtue with all her genuine and most engaging charms, and make us approach her with ease, familiarity, and affection? The dismal dress falls off, with which many divines, and some philosophers, have covered her; and nothing appears but gentleness, humanity, benevolence, affability; nay, even at proper intervals, play, frolic, and gaiety. She talks not of useless austerities and rigours, suffering and self-denial. She declares that her sole purpose is to make her votaries and all mankind, during every instant of their existence, if possible, cheerful and happy; nor does she ever willingly part with any pleasures but in hopes of ample compensation in some other period of their lives. The sole trouble which she demands, is that of just calculation, and a steady preference of the greater happiness. (EPM 279)

Hume seeks to dissuade his readers from moral values that are wrong (or, at least, universally and uniformly detrimental to self and society), and to inculcate those that are true (or, at least, universally and uniformly beneficial to self and society). What's at stake in the difference between a vocabulary of right and wrong and my parenthetical translations of these terms into a relational idiom? Lopston is shrewd in drawing our attention to the distinction—and it may well be more than merely verbal—between Johnson's tendency to talk about morality in simple predicates ("what is of most use is of most value") and Hume's characteristic appeal to our determinations about morality ("in all determinations of morality, this circumstance of public utility is ever principally in view"). Yet I would leave Professor Lopston with two related questions. First, what does "determination" mean in Hume's sentence? As William Walker has argued, the word "determination" is, from Sextus Empiricus onwards, an ambiguous one, able to refer either to discerning or to stipulating something about reality.⁸ Can we be sure that Hume, in the sentence quoted above, clearly means "determination" to mean some kind of stipulative, legislative act—as Lopston, if I'm reading him correctly, seems to think it does? The possibility that we can't leads to my second question: does a humanly *discerned* (as opposed to *posited*) good necessarily differ in kind from a good that is held to exist prior to human discernment? Hume, as far as I know, doesn't address this question. But here I'm touching upon matters that lie outside the purview of *The Passion for Happiness* and beyond my professional competence; I humbly leave them, if they're of interest, for philosophers to decide.

NOTES

- 1 This paper is a reply to William R. Connolly, "Christian Johnson and Pagan Hume," *Hume Studies* 27 (2001): 149–59, and Peter Loftson, "Hellenism, Freedom, and Morality in Hume and Johnson," *Hume Studies* 27 (2001): 161–72. References to Connolly and Loftson, and to my book *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume*—"PFH"—(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) will be provided parenthetically in the text.
- 2 *Roman Stoicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 103.
- 3 That Hume expresses his own view of human excellence in "The Stoic" has also been argued by Donald Livingston in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* (Chicago, 1998), 138–41. It is, I think, rather too hasty to dismiss the essay, as Isabel Rivers does, as a parody of Shaftesbury's "rhapsodic mode" (*Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, volume 2, *Shaftesbury to Hume* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 241).
- 4 *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 169–70. Subsequent references to the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (EPM) will be provided in the text.
- 5 "A Dialogue," in *Enquiries*, 342, 343.
- 6 *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1: 32–3.
- 7 *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1985), xxxvi.
- 8 "The Determination of Locke, Hume, and Fielding," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 20 (1996): 70–93.