



Samuel Johnson on Human Nature: Natural Depravity and the Doctrine of Original Sin

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Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was a dominant figure in English life and literature in the latter half of the eighteenth century. A genuine man of letters, Johnson at various times made his living as a journalist, poet, dramatist, essayist, lexicographer, critic, fictionist, and biographer. During the eighteenth century, his fame rested chiefly on *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), a monumental work that retained its authority for nearly 150 years. Today, his reputation is based primarily upon the biographical/critical essays, such as *The Lives of the Poets* (1781); the periodical essays, such as *The Rambler* (1750-52); and his only novel, the oriental fable *Rasselas* (1759).

Besides his own works, another source of Johnson's literary immortality is James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), which *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* describes as "the most celebrated biography in the English language." In the *Life*, Boswell presents a human Johnson, "warts and all," yet a Johnson possessed of qualities of mind and soul that can only be called great. Boswell also records Johnson's brilliant conversation, the humor and pungency of which have contributed to making him one of the most frequently quoted English authors, with over 319 entries in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Some typical examples: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures," "A man who is good enough to go to heaven, is good enough to be a clergyman," and "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money."

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A deeply pious Anglican, Johnson took pains to advance the cause of religion in his writings. Before beginning work on *The Rambler*, for example, he composed this prayer:

Almighty God, the giver of all good things, without whose help all Labour is ineffectual, and without whose grace all wisdom is folly, grant, I beseech Thee, that in this my undertaking thy Holy Spirit may not be withheld from me, but that I may promote thy glory, and the Salvation both of myself and others...¹

Though evident in many of his works, Johnson's beliefs are most explicit in his diaries, in his prayers and meditations, in the 28 sermons that he wrote for others, and in his conversations, as recorded by Boswell and other contemporaries.

These sources reveal that Johnson, like most of his fellow eighteenth-century Anglicans, viewed Christianity as a system of morality built upon the incentives supplied by the prospect of

reward and punishment in the next life. In his *Dictionary*, for example, Johnson defines religion as “virtue, as founded upon reverence of God, and expectation of future rewards and punishments.” According to this version of the Christian faith, salvation is offered conditionally, and the conditions are faith and a virtuous life, though typically it is virtue that is emphasized, not faith.²

Any understanding of Christian salvation is based upon certain beliefs about the nature of the human, and Johnson’s is no exception. The purpose of this essay is to reconstruct Johnson’s beliefs about human nature from the sources mentioned above, while noting, first, the reactions that these beliefs have provoked and, second, the consistencies and inconsistencies between the Johnsonian view of humanity and that of the Christian church.

I. HUMAN DEPRAVITY

Though varying somewhat in intensity, most of Samuel Johnson’s observations on human nature manifest his conviction that human beings are not inherently good, but naturally depraved. According to one source, Johnson’s “general and common” assertion was “that Man was by Nature much more inclined to evil than to good.”³ In her *Anecdotes*, Johnson’s friend Hester Thrale mentions the fixity of Johnson’s opinions on “the natural depravity of mankind and remains of original sin.”⁴ Mrs. Chapone, a literary lady of Johnson’s acquaintance, tells how she “wondered to hear [Johnson]...maintain that the human heart is naturally malevolent, and that all the benevolence we see in the few who are good, is acquired by

¹*Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde, vol. 1 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Allen and John H. Middendorf (New Haven: Yale, 1958) 43.

²For a brief account of the eighteenth-century Anglican doctrine of personal salvation, see Gregory F. Scholtz, “Anglicanism in the Age of Johnson: The Doctrine of Conditional Salvation,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (Winter 1988-89) 182-207.

³*Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 2.256.

⁴*Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson. LL.D.*, ed. S. C. Roberts (1925; reprint, New York: Books for Libraries, 1980) 115-16.

reason and religion.”⁵ And James Boswell, in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, records Johnson’s brusque response to his Scottish hostess Lady Macleod, when she asked whether man was naturally good: “No, madam, no more than a wolf.”⁶

Nor were Johnson’s remarks on the natural depravity of humankind confined to polite conversation. In his writings—especially the sermons—Johnson consistently depicts human nature as weak and corrupt:

What can any man see, either within or without himself, that does not afford him some reason to remark his own ignorance, imbecility [weakness], and meanness? The depravity of mankind is so easily discoverable, that nothing but the desert or the cell can exclude it from notice.

Such is the present weakness and corruption of human nature, that sincerity, real sincerity, is rarely to be found.

Such is the weakness of human nature, that every particular state, or condition, lies open to particular temptations.

The continual occurrence of temptation, and that imbecility of nature, which every man sees in others, and has experienced in himself, seems to have made many doubtful of the possibility of salvation.⁷

His identification of this weakness and corruption with human nature indicates that he considers human susceptibility to evil not something learned or otherwise acquired, but something “natural” or inherent. And since human nature is by definition that which is common to all human beings, this condition must also be universal. Thus Johnson was able to deny, during his visit to Scotland in 1773, that any child is the moral inferior of another. The perception “that of two children, equally well educated, one was naturally much worse than another” is simply the result “of greater attention being paid to instruction by one child than another, and of a variety of imperceptible causes, such as instruction being counteracted by servants.”⁸

Since in the latter half of the eighteenth century it had become increasingly fashionable to describe humankind as naturally benevolent, it is not surprising that a few of Johnson’s contemporaries thought his pronouncements rather severe. Mrs. Chapone, for example, not only “wondered” at Johnson’s remarks but actually had the temerity to dispute them. As she told a friend, “You may believe I entirely disagreed with him, being as you know, fully persuaded that benevolence...is as much a part of our nature as self love.”⁹ And Boswell relates that Lady

⁵*The Posthumous Works of Mrs. Chapone*, 2 vols. (London, 1807) 1.73.

⁶*The Life of Samuel Johnson. LL.D.*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. and enl. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934-64) 5: 211; hereafter cited as *Life*.

⁷Sermon 8, in *Samuel Johnson: Sermons*, ed. Jean H. Hagstrum and James Gray, vol. 14 of the *Yale Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale, 1978) 94; *Rambler* 175, in *Samuel Johnson: The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, vols. 3-5 of the *Yale Works* (New Haven: Yale, 1969) 5: 160; Sermon 7, in *Yale Works*, 14.80; Sermon 16, in *Yale Works* 14.171; Sermon 3, in *Yale Works*, 14.32.

⁸*Life*, 5.214. Cf. *Life*, 1.437: “Children are always cruel. Savages are always cruel. Pity is acquired and improved by the cultivation of reason.”

⁹*Chapone*, 1.72-73.

Macleod, upon hearing Johnson deny natural goodness to humanity, “started at this, saying, in a low voice, ‘This is worse than Swift.’”¹⁰

Similarly impressed, modern students of Johnson’s moral thought label the Johnsonian view of humanity “pessimistic” and find parallels for it in the writings of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard de Mandeville, seventeenth-century thinkers famous for their disbelief in the idea of innate human goodness. Thus, W. Jackson Bate, the most highly acclaimed twentieth-century biographer of Johnson, asserts that the moral essays contain “as pessimistic a view of the human condition as anyone has ever presented,” a view that reveals “Johnson’s kinship with Hobbes, Swift, and Mandeville.”¹¹ Robert Voitle suggests that “it is this pessimism which provokes the occasional critic to call Johnson a Calvinist” and points to similarities between Johnson’s thought and Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*: “Johnson has some qualities in common with Mandeville, and at times seems to be fighting the same battle.... [H]e is willing enough to believe men are evil.”¹² Paul Alkon concludes that Johnson vigorously affirms “the Hobbesian assumption that unselfish action is indeed foreign to humanity.”¹³

It cannot be denied that Johnson's conception of human nature is a dark and somber one, especially when compared to the optimistic view so conspicuous in the works of popular contemporaries like novelists Henry Fielding (*Tom Jones*) and Laurence Sterne (*Sentimental Journey*). And some of his statements do indeed bring to mind the tough-minded realism of Hobbes and Mandeville. Like Mandeville, whom he read with some appreciation, Johnson rejects any possibility of disinterested human goodness.¹⁴ As he told Mrs. Thrale, "I hope I have not lost my Sensibility of Wrong, but I hope likewise that I have seen sufficient of the World to prevent my expecting to find any Action whose Motives, & all its Parts are good."¹⁵ And the pessimism of Hobbes's famous characterization of human life in the state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*Leviathan*) barely exceeds that of Johnson's description of human life under the restraining influence of civilization:

Men are first wild and unsocial, living each man to himself, taking from the weak, and losing to the strong. In their first coalitions of society, much of this original savageness is retained. Of general happiness, the product of general confidence, there is yet no thought. Men continue to prosecute their own advantages by the nearest way; and the utmost severity of the civil law is necessary to restrain

¹⁰*Life*, 5.211.

¹¹*Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) 298, 492.

¹²*Samuel Johnson the Moralizer* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1961) 132, 54.

¹³*Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ., 1967) 41.

¹⁴According to Mrs. Thrale (*Anecdotes*, 115-116) Johnson was "indeed a most acute observer" of the effects of natural depravity and original sin, and he "used to say sometimes, half in jest half in earnest, that they were the remains of his old tutor Mandeville's instructions. As a book however, he took care always loudly to condemn the Fable of the Bees, but not without adding, 'that it was the work of a thinking man.'"

¹⁵*Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776-1809*, ed. Katherine C. Balderston, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951) 1.183-84.

individuals from plundering each other. The restraints then necessary, are restraints from plunder, from acts of public violence, and undisguised oppression. The ferocity of our ancestors, as of all other nations, produced not fraud, but rapine. They had not yet learned to cheat, and attempted only to rob. As manners grow more polished, with the knowledge of good, men attain likewise dexterity in evil. Open rapine becomes less frequent, and violence gives way to cunning. Those who before invaded pastures and stormed houses, now begin to enrich themselves by unequal contracts and fraudulent intromissions....I am afraid the increase of commerce, and the incessant struggle for riches which commerce excites, gives us no prospect of an end speedily to be expected of artifice and fraud.¹⁶

Civilization and its laws only force the relentless current of human vice into other channels; human beings remain the same—inherently depraved and prone to evil. This corruption, furthermore, is so extensive that not even man's noblest faculty—reason—escapes it. As Johnson maintains in Sermon 18, "the great task of man, as a moral agent" is "to subdue passion, and

regulate desire.” But this is a task for which “reason, however assisted and enforced by human laws, has been found insufficient.”¹⁷ Johnson further elaborates his belief of the insufficiency of reason in his moral allegory *The Vision of Theodore*, the locus classicus of the Johnsonian conception of the relation of reason to religion. In Theodore’s dream vision, the figure of Reason describes herself as “of all subordinate beings the noblest and the greatest,” yet her ultimate function is to lead men to Religion. She therefore warns her followers not to trust to her alone, but to “inlist themselves among the votaries of Religion.” Those unfortunates who fail to heed her advice are weakened by Passion and Appetite, bound by Habit, and dragged away into the caves of Despair, “from whose prisons none can escape.”¹⁸

II. DEPRAVITY AND ORIGINAL SIN

But as startlingly severe as it may have appeared to Mrs. Chapone and Lady Macleod, and as extraordinarily pessimistic as it evidently appears to Bate, Alkon, and Voitle, Dr. Johnson’s view of human nature is neither peculiar to him nor at all extraordinary in the context of Western thought. In fact, the Johnsonian perception of man is quite consistent with that most familiar of ideas—the concept of original sin. Though Johnson has almost nothing to say about the origin and transmission of natural depravity, his opinion that all people are inherently weak, corrupt, and inclined to evil seems otherwise indistinguishable from the most generally accepted understanding of the Christian doctrine: “the innate depravity, corruption, or evil tendency of man’s nature, in all individuals of the human race, held to be inherited from Adam in consequence of the Fall” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Therefore, while several of Johnson’s younger contemporaries may indeed have found his view of humanity highly uncongenial, it is doubtful that they also found it totally unfamiliar. Surely Mrs. Chapone knew the teachings of her own Church

¹⁶*Life* 2.198-99

¹⁷*Yale Works*, 14.193.

¹⁸*The Vision of Theodore*, in *Works*, ed. Arthur Murphy, 12 vols. (London, 1823) 11. 340-42.

of England on human nature: “Original sin...is the fault and corruption of every man that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil...” (Article IX of The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion). And although it perhaps had become unfashionable to espouse it in literary circles, there is no indication that the Anglican church had abandoned—even unofficially—its belief in the inherent corruption of humankind. On the contrary, divines of the period consistently asserted humanity’s innate moral corruption.

Unfortunately, the modern-day analyses of Bate, Alkon, and Voitle tend to obscure the wholly traditional nature of Johnson’s perception of humanity by noting parallels for it in the iconoclastic philosophies of Hobbes and Mandeville while neglecting the more relevant parallels that exist in more conventional sources such as the Bible; the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Homilies, and the Book of Common Prayer (all sixteenth-century repositories of Anglican doctrine); and the theologies of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin.

Indeed, when compared to the affirmations of human depravity found in these writings, representative of the main current of Protestant thought, Johnson’s pronouncements on human

nature seem almost mild. Using the language of the Psalms, St. Paul, for example, describes humanity as devoid of righteousness—lying, slanderous, profane, murderous, violent, and impious:

As it is written, There is none righteous, no not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes....For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:9-18, 23)

St. Augustine asserts that the sin of Adam made of all humankind a *massa damnata*:

The whole mass of the human race stood condemned, lying ruined and wallowing in evil, being plunged from evil into evil and, having joined causes with the angels who had sinned, it was paying the fully deserved penalty for impious desertion.¹⁹

Luther insists (as does Calvin) that human depravity is so extensive as to exclude any notion of “free will”:

If we believe that original sin has so ruined us that even in those who are led by the Spirit it causes a great deal of trouble by struggling against the good, it is clear that in a man devoid of the Spirit there is nothing left than can turn toward the good, but only toward evil.²⁰

¹⁹*Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. and ed. Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955) 355.

²⁰*The Bondage of the Will*, ed. Philip S. Watson, vol. 33 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 293.

The author of the Church of England Homily “Of the Misery of All Mankind” (1547) also informs his readers that their corruption is total:

Of ourselves, and by ourselves, we have no goodness, help, nor salvation; but contrariwise, sin, damnation, and death everlasting.
[W]e are not able to think a good thought, or work a good deed, so that we can find in ourselves no hope of salvation, but rather whatsoever maketh unto our destruction.²¹

Since Johnson seldom describes the human plight in language this severe, never denies the freedom of the will, and never asserts the *total* depravity of human nature, it is difficult to

agree with W. Jackson Bate's assertion that "we could extract from Johnson's essays as pessimistic a view of the human condition as anyone has ever presented."²² While pessimism is certainly a salient feature of the Johnsonian view of man, his affirmation of the inherent weakness, sinfulness, and corruption of human nature is no more than what Swift scholar Louis Landa has called "the pessimism at the heart of Christianity."²³ And as church historian A. C. McGiffert has pointed out, it was upon this very belief ("a conviction of human corruption and helplessness") that "the historic Catholic system, both of east and west, was built."²⁴

Thus, Johnson's pessimistic view of human nature places him safely within the broadest confines of the Christian tradition, at least in regard to the doctrine of original sin. But his view of human nature does not place him centrally within the Protestant branch of that tradition, insofar as Protestant Christianity is defined by an allegiance to the reformers' doctrine of justification by faith alone. That doctrine assumes a human condition of total helplessness and corruption, a condition in which the sinner can do nothing to merit divine forgiveness and acceptance. As pessimistic about human nature as Johnson might seem, he never asserts, as did Luther and Calvin, that human beings are completely corrupt and helpless. To do so would have been inconsistent with his belief that salvation depended not only on faith, but also on human goodness. Ironically, then, Johnson's view of humankind manifests more consistency with Roman Catholic doctrine, with its emphasis on human ability to cooperate in the process of salvation, than it does with the teachings of classical Protestantism. However, I would hazard to guess that there are a great many Protestants today who hold beliefs similar to Johnson's and many others who would find Johnson's pronouncements on human nature to be as shockingly pessimistic as did Mrs. Chapone, Lady Macleod, Bate, Alkon, and Voitle.

²¹*Certain Sermons or Homilies* (Oxford, 1840) 14, 16.

²²Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 298.

²³"*Gulliver's Travels*" and *Other Writings by Jonathan Swift* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) xxi-xxii.

²⁴*Protestant Thought before Kant* (1911; reprint, New York: Harper, 1961) 2.