

Samuel Johnson's Moral Psychology and Locke's "Of Power"

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While praising Shakespeare for his "native excellence," his "vigilance of observation," and his "accuracy of distinction," Dr. Johnson somewhat oddly pauses to describe the great watershed of intellectual history that sets Shakespeare's time apart from his own — that is, the advent of late seventeenth-century philosophy with all its debates about human motivation:

The contest about the original benevolence or malignity of man had not yet commenced. Speculation had not yet attempted to analyse the mind, to trace the passions to their sources, to unfold the seminal principles of vice and virtue, or sound the depths of the heart for the motives of action. All those enquiries, which from that time that human nature became the fashionable study, have been made sometimes with nice discernment, but often with idle subtilty, were yet unattempted.¹

Johnson's irony here is complex and trenchant. To the reader acquainted with Johnson's own unequivocal position in the contest about the "original benevolence or malignity of man," the very first sentence is the give-away. Studies of human nature have now become "fashionable," and if they occasionally show "nice discernment" — faint praise at best — they show "idle subtilty" as well. Clearly Shakespeare is to be commended for striking out and sustaining his insights into human motivation without the dubious benefit of such inquiries, for gleaning his knowledge about human nature by "mingling as he

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¹ *Preface to Shakespeare in Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, vols. 7–8 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 10 vols. to date (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958–); 7:88. Subsequent citations from the *Rambler*, *Idler*, *Adventurer*, and *Sermons* are based on the *Yale Edition*, and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

could" in the "business and amusements" of the world, rather than by studying "in the closet."²

The tack Johnson has chosen in praising Shakespeare is peculiar, however, because Johnson himself was intensely committed to the enterprises he disparages here. He spent a lot of time in his own closet reading works that unfolded the "seminal principles of vice and virtue," and by no means regarded this time as ill spent. Johnson scholars have often noted that, of all the late seventeenth-century inquirers into the human mind, Locke was the one Johnson absorbed the most comfortably and quoted the most frequently. Several studies aiming in part to define the relationship between Locke and Johnson include the impressive fact that Johnson quotes Locke 1,674 times in the first volume of his *Dictionary* alone, considerably more often than he quotes Boyle and even Hooker.³ But the nature of Locke's impact on Johnson can be defined more accurately if we consider not simply the volume of citations, but also the specific sources of them. In his study of Johnson's philosophic diction, W. K. Wimsatt argued that the citations from Locke's works "epitomize his characteristic doctrine of knowledge," a doctrine which Johnson basically shared.⁴ A closer inspection of the citations, however, shows that Johnson was equally interested in Locke's system of moral philosophy. In particular, Johnson quotes from the two related chapters in *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding* which analyze freedom and moral effort—"Of Modes of Pleasure and Pain" (2.20) and "Of Power" (2.21)—no fewer than two hundred times, and quite possibly more. In other words, Johnson reproduces the arguments of these chapters bit by bit throughout both volumes of the *Dictionary*.

As James L. Clifford has explained, Johnson compiled the *Dictionary* by choosing the texts he liked, underlining the words to be illustrated, and bracketing the passages which his amanuenses would later transcribe.⁵ Because the texts, words, and passages are of Johnson's

²Yale Edition, 7:88.

³See Lewis Freed, "The Sources of Johnson's Dictionary," (Ph.D. diss., Cornell, 1930). W. K. Wimsatt has reprinted several of Freed's statistical tabulations of the first volume of the *Dictionary* in *Philosophic Words* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1948), p. 34, n. 17. In vol. 1, Johnson cites Hooker 1,212 times; South 1,092; Boyle 592; Watt 509; Arbuthnot 1,029.

⁴Wimsatt, p. 95. References to Locke's work will be from John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. J. W. Yolton (London: Everyman Library, 1978), p. 206 (Bk. 2, ch. 21, para. 29). Book, chapter, and paragraph numbers for subsequent citations will be noted parenthetically.

⁵James L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson* (New York: McGraw-Hall, 1979), p. 47. See also Gwin J. Kolb and Ruth A. Kolb, "The Selection and Use of the Illustrative Quotations in Dr. Johnson's Dictionary," *New Aspects of Lexicography*, ed. Howard D. Weinbrot (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 61-72.

own choosing, the *Dictionary* is then, among other things, an index of his literary and philosophical interests and preferences. Furthermore, knowing as we do that Johnson “quoted no authour whose writings had a tendency to hurt sound religion and morality,” his exhaustive citations from *Essay*, 2.20–21 tell us about more than his lexicographical method alone.⁶ They also indicate an extremely high esteem for, if not indeed an actual endorsement of, Locke’s arguments. This being so, Johnson’s quotations provide a reliable focus for investigating Johnson’s relationship to Locke’s moral philosophy, a relationship which has been obfuscated largely because Locke’s own contributions as a moral philosopher have been misunderstood. Johnson’s persistent use elsewhere in his writings of the ideas he cites in the *Dictionary* invites us to argue that Locke’s theory of moral psychology informed Johnson’s thought as a moralist. After surveying the breadth of Johnson’s citations from these chapters, I will examine first the descriptive and prescriptive similarities between Locke’s and Johnson’s outlooks on motivation; second, Johnson’s refinement of these premises in his discussion of the moral aspects of memory; and finally, his characteristically anxious re-channelling of Lockean ideas about free agency, reflection, and the choice of life.

In “Of Modes of Pleasure and Pain” Locke “trace[s] the passions to their sources” and “sound[s] the depths of the heart for the motives of action,” to recall Johnson’s formulations. Locke argues in this chapter that pleasure and pain — of the mind as well as the body, he repeatedly insists — are the basis of all our passions, and that we call things good or evil only in reference to the pleasure or pain they cause us. This short chapter proved especially suitable to Johnson’s lexicographical purposes because it is largely devoted to defining the passions in terms of our desire for pleasure and our avoidance of pain. Accordingly, and with very minimal changes in syntax, Johnson simply lifts Locke’s own definitions of words such as “good,” “evil,” “hatred,” and “joy,” as well as those more familiar Johnsonian words such as “desire,” “hope,” “fear,” “sorrow,” and “despair” — words no less “philosophic” than the weightier vocabulary of epistemological discourse, such as “impression” and “extension.”

After establishing that the desire for what will cause pleasure or the fear of what will cause pain is the spur of all our actions, Locke continues in “Of Power” to argue that liberty consists in our ability to suspend the satisfaction of any particular desire until we may consider whether it actually will promote our happiness, and then to determine

⁶James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 1:189.

our wills in the pursuit or forbearance of it as we choose after this due and rational examination. Although Johnson's citations range through the whole of this extremely long chapter (by far the longest in the *Essay*), particular sections—such as 2.21.45, 50, 53–56, 58–59 and 69—have been broken down and re-presented almost in their entirety. The scope of the citations themselves is enormous. First, Johnson uses this chapter as an illustrative source for the language of moral philosophy, citing words such as “freewill,” “free,” “liberty,” “volition,” “compulsion,” and “choice” on Locke's authority. Johnson illustrates the word “motive,” for example, without any modification of Locke's original: “The motive for continuing in the same state or action is only the present satisfaction in it; the motive to change is always some *uneasiness*.”⁷

Second, Johnson draws on the less technical explanatory words Locke employs when amplifying his theory, as the following parallel passages show.

This is the hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual beings, in their constant endeavours after and a steady prosecution of true felicity, that they can *suspend* this prosecution in particular cases till they have looked before them, and informed themselves whether that particular thing which is then proposed or desired lies in the way to their main end.

(*Essay*, 2.21.52)

[endeavour]

This is the hinge on which turns the liberty of intellectual beings, in their constant *endeavours* after, and a steady prosecution of true felicity.

[suspend]

This is the hinge on which turns the liberty of intellectual beings, in their steady prosecution of true felicity, that they can *suspend* this prosecution in particular cases, till they have looked before them.

[look]

Intellectual being, in their constant endeavours after true felicity, can *suspend* this prosecution in particular cases, till they have *looked* before them, and informed themselves, whether that

⁷Johnson used either the fourth (1740) or the fifth (1751) edition of Locke's collected works (see Wimsatt, pp. 154–55). Except for modernizing the spelling and reducing the number of italicized works, Yolton presents the text as Johnson would have read it.

particular thing lie in the way to their main end.⁸

The passages in the right-hand column show Johnson's method of reworking source material to illustrate selected words. Johnson's practice was clearly to isolate passages he particularly liked and to use them as a mine for every possible word. Although he considerably elides and often slightly modifies Locke's loose and expansive original, he rarely disrupts its sense.

Finally, Johnson—whose purpose after all was to compile a dictionary—simply rifles the rest of this chapter for every miscellaneous word it could conceivably afford—words such as “plum” and “billiard.” The following example, in which Locke describes how our desire for immediate and habitual pleasures prompts us to neglect even what we acknowledge to be greater goods, conveys some idea of Johnson's method:

On the other side, let a drunkard see that his health decays, his estate wastes; discredit and diseases, and the want of all things, even of his beloved drink, attends him in the course he follows; yet the returns of *uneasiness* to miss his companions, the habitual thirst after his cups at the usual time, drives him to the tavern, though he has in his view the loss of health and plenty, and perhaps of the joys of another life, the least of which is no inconsiderable good, but such as he confesses is far greater than the tickling of his palate with a glass of wine, or the idle chat of a soaking club.

(*Essay*, 2.21.35)

[soak]

Let a drunkard see that his health decays, his estate wastes, yet the habitual thirst after his cups drives him to the tavern, though he has in his view the loss of health and plenty; the least of which he confesses is far greater than the tickling of his palate with a glass of wine, or the idle chat of a *soaking* club.

[tickle]

A drunkard, the habitual thirst after his cups, drives to the tavern, though he has in his view the loss of health, and perhaps the joys of another life, the least of which is such a good as he confesses is far greater than the *tickling* of his palate with a glass of wine.

⁸All citations from the *Dictionary* are based on the first edition (London, 1755), which is not paginated. Subsequent references to the Preface and the *Dictionary* will not be footnoted. Except where specifically indicated, references to Locke's *Essay* are based on his text rather than on Johnson's citations in the *Dictionary*.

[chat]

The least is no inconsiderable good, but such as he confesses is far greater than the tickling of his palate with a glass of wine, or the idle *chat* of a soaking club.

These passages exemplify the kind of violent truncation Johnson and his amanuenses occasionally resort to in order to conserve space. The virtually unintelligible illustration of "tickle" represents one of those "mutilated examples," those "clusters of words, in which scarcely any meaning is retained," that Johnson apologizes for in the Preface to the *Dictionary*.⁹ In any event, the words "tickle," "soak," and "chat" are hardly the diction of moral philosophy. Yet Johnson has taken care to preserve Locke's extremely sententious contexts, so that the reader may be morally instructed regardless of how incongruous the word may seem in didactic discourse. It is worth pointing out here that, except where the original is already cast in the form of a definition, Johnson's citations are not especially apt. Although Johnson was without doubt extremely selective about illustrations of morally or theologically significant words, on the whole he does not appear to have been fastidious about how well Locke's—or anybody else's—sentences actually illustrate more or less "neutral" terms. Johnson went from favored texts and passages to particular words. He used those two chapters of Locke's *Essay* because he liked and approved of their moral arguments, not because they offered elegant usages of words such as "tennis"-ball and "of."

Locke's description of human life rang true to Johnson. To Locke, as to Johnson, we spend our lives endeavoring to satisfy successive desires, where desire is defined as the "uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of anything whose present enjoyment carries

⁹In the Preface to the *Dictionary*, Johnson further explains that "by hasty detrunction," the "general tendency of sentences may be changed: the divine may desert his tenets, or the philosopher his system." Many of Locke's sentences are indeed hastily detruncted, but the general tendency of his sentences, while often drastically limited, is rarely actually changed. An exception: in *Essay* 2.20.6, Locke writes, "For whatever good is proposed, if its absence carries no displeasure or pain with it, if a man may be easy and content without it, there is no desire nor endeavour after it." Citing the word "displeasure," Johnson writes, "When good is proposed its absence carries displeasure or pain with it." Johnson cites sentences similar to Locke's original elsewhere in the *Dictionary*, so his reason for changing the sense here was clearly not editorial but purely practical.

the *idea* of delight with it" (2.20.6, cited under "desire"). This uneasiness, as Locke explains, is the "chief, if not only, spur to human industry and action" (2.20.6, cited under "spur"). To claim that the uneasiness of desire invariably motivates us to obtain the happiness or pleasure which the satisfaction of that desire seems to promise may sound grossly hedonistic and altogether contrary to the spirit of Johnson's pervasive moralism. Johnson himself, however, obviously did not regard the matter in this light. For Johnson, too, desire is the active principle, and even in religious contexts he does not hesitate to argue that the desire for gratification is the motive for all our actions. In *Sermon* 14, for example, Johnson declares, "Every man is conscious, that he neither performs, nor forbears any thing upon any other motive than the prospect either of an immediate gratification, or a distant reward." It is, moreover, precisely the uneasiness *Rasselas* feels in want of absent good that sends him questing for happinesses other than the now palliating ones his tedious Happy Valley offers: "give me something to desire," he pleads, for "some desire," as Imlac later explains, is "necessary to keep life in motion."¹⁰

In addition to endorsing Locke's effort to legitimize the energy generated by the uneasiness of desire, Johnson was equally responsive to the restlessness and perpetual dissatisfaction implicit in this theory of human motivation. Because we live in what Locke calls a "narrow scantling of capacity," we "enjoy but one pleasure at once" (2.21.59, cited under "scantling"). For this reason, the contentment we may feel after satisfying one desire soon dissipates as the uneasiness we feel upon immediately desiring something else sends us in pursuit of happiness yet again: "no sooner is one action dispatched, which by such a determination of the *will* we are set upon, but another uneasiness is ready to set us on work" (2.21.45, cited under "despatch" and "set"). The uneasy, restlessly pursuing condition Locke describes is essentially identical to Johnson's conception of our condition, according to which our desires always fall a step short of the possibilities for present satisfaction, and all our pursuits are doomed, like *Rasselas* itself, to inconclusiveness: "we desire, we pursue, we obtain, we are satiated; we desire something else, and begin a new pursuit" (*Rambler* No. 6). Clearly, the "hunger of imagination" as it responds to the uneasiness of our desires or fears, the paradigm of wanting, pursuing, obtaining, and wanting all over again, which we have come to think of as distinctively Johnsonian, is not uniquely Johnsonian at all. What Johnson recognized and unquestionably appreciated in Locke's dis-

¹⁰*The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Brian Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), chs. 3, 8. Subsequent citations will be noted parenthetically.

cussion was the traditional "vanity of vanities" theme developed with a psychological emphasis on the structure of human desiring itself.¹¹

Neither Locke nor Johnson stops with the "naturalistic" explanation of motivation we have just outlined. Indeed, Locke's conspicuously prescriptive arguments in "Of Power" seem to have impressed Johnson. These prescriptive intentions deserve close attention, because critics of Johnson's relationship to Locke have not generally been willing to recognize Locke's intensely moral purposes, and this unwillingness in turn suggests a failure to read "Of Power" as attentively and sympathetically as Johnson himself manifestly did. When Robert Voitle, for example, sets Johnson apart from naturalistic psychologists—such as Hobbes and Locke—by stressing the "degree of free will [Johnson's] emphasis on reason confers on man," he is apparently unaware that Locke's aim in "Of Power" is to insist upon and account for the role reason has in insuring our free agency and our dignity.¹² Even Paul Kent Alkon, who has written so persuasively on the Lockean background of Johnson's moral thought, and who has noted many of his citations from "Of Power," falls into a similar error. He finds in Johnson's moral essays "a harmonious acceptance of Locke's descriptive psychology within a broader framework of ethical concern"—as if Locke's moral psychology were purely descriptive and not already developed "within a broader framework of ethical concern."¹³ As Hans Aarsleff has demonstrated, these persistent misunderstandings originate in the nineteenth century, when Locke was frequently charged with hedonism or utilitarianism, despite the fact that he advances quite a different moral position in "Of Power."¹⁴ What concerns us here is that these misunderstandings seriously interfere with our appreciation of what Johnson—no hedonist or utilitarian—saw and valued in Locke.

¹¹See Walter Jackson Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), pp. 63–91.

¹²Robert Voitle, *Samuel Johnson the Moralist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1961), p. 25. Voitle argues that, aside from sharing an appreciation for the hard facts of experience, Johnson and Locke have very little in common. See also Jean A. Hagstrum, *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1952), p. 8.

¹³Paul Kent Alkon, *Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 80, n. 47; p. 86. My argument does not challenge Alkon's work but rather suggests that his conclusions need not be so tentative.

¹⁴Hans Aarsleff, "Locke's Reputation in Nineteenth-Century England," in *From Locke to Saussure* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 120–45. I am also very indebted to Aarsleff's "The State of Nature and the Nature of Man in Locke," in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. John W. Yolton (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 99–136. See also Raymond Polin, "John Locke's Conception of Freedom," in this same collection, pp. 1–18.

In presenting human behavior as a perpetual quest after successive gratifications, Locke is far from recommending that this is how we *ought* to behave. This is simply how we *would* behave if we had no reference to futurity and no power to direct our actions towards that end, and if immediate and “natural” impulses alone governed our behavior. If this were the case, as Locke writes with quiet contempt, we would be no more than “a company of poor insects, whereof some are bees, delighted with flowers and their sweetness; others beetles, delighted with other kinds of viands” (2.21.55, cited under “delight” and “bee”). In Locke’s view, the desires that motivate us under these circumstances are not turbulent or voracious. Instead, they are mean, insect-like, but entirely absorbing. This vision is not unlike Johnson’s survey of that swarm of ceaselessly wishing humanity at the outset of “The Vanity of Human Wishes”—and it is Johnson, not Locke, who cannot maintain this confidently judgmental posture for long. But Johnson, too, typically describes our actions in ruthlessly “naturalistic” ways, while likewise making it clear that we do have the power to govern our desires and behave according to principle. In *Rambler* No. 151, for example, after discussing the “climactericks of the mind,” he explains, “I have in this view of life considered men as actuated only by natural desires, and yielding to their own inclinations without regard to superior principles, by which the force of external agents may be counteracted. . . . human desires will be always ranging; but these motions, though very powerful, are not resistless; nature may be regulated.”

Locke also wishes to regulate nature and to recommend the operation of “superior principles.” In “Of Power” he sets out to explain exactly how this is possible. He argues that the proper way of behaving is not to be found either by doing everything we desire or by cultivating “indifferency” and extinguishing desires, but rather by counteracting our temporal desires with other desires that refer to these “superior principles.” During the time between desiring and determining our wills to pursue or forbear that desire, we must use the liberty we have to suspend the prosecution of a given desire until we have rationally judged whether it will promote our true happiness—and our true happiness, Locke repeats, is the reward of eternal bliss. Through the intervention of our judgment, which will either reject or approve the pursuit of a proposed desire on the basis of reasoned assessments and comparisons, we must make our desire for eternal happiness and our fear of eternal misery prevail over the various hopes and fears that impinge upon us in the present: “The rewards and punishments of another life, which the Almighty has established as the enforcements of his law, are of weight enough to determine the choice” of the appropriate good (2.21.70, cited under

"punishment" and "enforcement"). For Johnson, too, moral action results from rationally comparing present gratifications with future ones, and then from preferring the latter. We can only "secure distant or permanent happiness" by the "forbearance of some immediate gratification" (*Rambler* No. 178). The "superior principles" that, he insists, can regulate our ranging natural desires are likewise future rewards and punishments. These "precepts of theology" serve to "enforce . . . a life in which pleasures are to be refused for fear of invisible punishments, and calamities sometimes to be sought . . . in hope of rewards that shall be obtained in another state" (*Rambler* No. 178).

Locke's linking of morality and religion, his insistence that divine rewards and punishments are the true foundations of morality, unquestionably appealed to Johnson, who also could not conceive of secure and sustained probity without such a prospect and the psychological pressures of hope and fear it would excite in us.¹⁵ Repudiating the argument he published in the first version of this chapter, Locke insists again and again throughout the revised version that the bare knowledge, indeed, even the absolute conviction, of the greater good does not motivate us to behave in accordance with it.¹⁶ Daily experience informs us that "the infinitely greatest confessed good" is "often neglected to satisfy the successive uneasiness of our desires pursuing trifles" (2.21.38, cited under "trifles"), and that men "may have a clear view of good, great and confessed good, without being concerned for it or moved by it, if they think they can make up their happiness without it" (2.21.43, cited under "confess").

Johnson similarly argues that men neglect the "laws of which they own the obligation" and ignore the "rewards of which they believe the reality" (*Rambler* No. 70). For Johnson then, as for Locke, mere "conviction is without effect" (*Rambler* No. 178), for conviction cannot empower us to resist the multitude of uneasinesses that continually besets us. As Johnson puts it in his "Introduction" to *The Preceptor*, "the Laws of mere Morality are of no coercive Power; and however they may by Conviction of their Fitness please the Reasoner in the Shade . . . they will be of little force against the Ardour of Desire . . . amidst the Pleasures and Tumults of the World."¹⁷ The rational acknowledg-

¹⁵For especially fine discussions of Johnson's views on rewards and punishments and the linking of morality and religion, see Alkon, pp. 54-64; and James Gray, *Johnson's Sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 148-82.

¹⁶Hans Aarsleff summarizes Locke's revisions in "The State of Nature and the Nature of Man."

¹⁷*Samuel Johnson's Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Allen T. Hazen (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1937), p. 186.

ment of the fitness of the greater good is not enough to move and determine our wills to pursue it. One must rather desire it as well, for as Locke puts it, until a man "*hungers and thirsts after righteousness*, till he feels an uneasiness in the want of it, his *will* will not be determined to any action in pursuit of this confessed greater good" (2.21.35, cited under "thirst").¹⁸ Given that the desire for happiness and the fear of misery are the sole motives for action, only by pondering the prospect of reward and punishment, only by contemplating and comparing "the difference between good and evil sufficiently to quicken aversion, or invigorate desire" (*Rambler* No. 178), can we train our desires to forego the pleasures that allure us here. In his "Introduction" to *The Preceptor*, then, when Johnson argues that "Virtue may owe her Panegyrics to Morality, but must derive her Authority from Religion," "authority" literally means that "coercive Power" of enforcement, the prospect of which alone can engage our fears and desires and move us to behave virtuously amidst "the Pleasures and Tumults of the World."¹⁹

Locke is well aware that the process of moral effort he describes poses several practical problems, and Johnson shows himself distinctively Lockean in his sensitivity to them. Desiring that ultimate future good more than this paltry immediate one is no easy matter. First of all, the temporal disparity between the present and the future makes us liable to fundamental errors of judgment, assessment, and comparison. Being remote and absent, future goods — even when they are in reality infinitely greater — simply seem smaller and less compelling, and consequently they do not move us as forcibly as pleasures which are more immediate and which therefore are felt to be more urgently pressing: "Objects near our view are apt to be thought greater than those of a larger size that are more remote; and so it is with pleasures and pains: the present is apt to carry it, and those at a distance have the disadvantages in the comparison" (2.21.63, cited under "view" and "carry"). Second, the very way we experience pleasure and pain tends to entrench us in the present. Because the present is forcibly felt and the future yet to be enjoyed, foregoing a present pleasure and preferring a future one in its stead actually involves us in present pain — which we always seek to avoid and which we feel more acutely than the prospective enjoyment of any future good: "Because the abstinence from a present pleasure that offers itself is a pain, nay, oftentimes a very great one, the desire being inflamed by a near and

¹⁸Locke typically italicizes scriptural quotations which he often employs to legitimize his arguments. Johnson cites several such passages. See *Dictionary* under "drive" (2.21.34) and "render" (2.21.59).

¹⁹*Prefaces and Dedications*, p. 186.

tempting object, it is no wonder that that operates after the same manner as pain does, and lessens in our thoughts what is future, and so forces us, as it were, blindfold into its embraces" (2.21.64, cited under "abstinence").

The only way to overcome these problems and compensate for our temporal shortsightedness is to make that infinitely greater future good urgently felt in the present when we make our choices, in which case no one could possibly choose amiss: "Were the satisfaction of a lust and the joys of heaven offered at once to anyone's present possession, he would not balance or err in the determination of his choice" (2.21.58, cited under "balance"). In this manner, we can raise and strengthen our desires for the future state and free ourselves from the discomfort of more immediate uneasinesses. Unless we make our desires for the future good felt in the present moment, "the *will*, free from the determination of such desires, is left to the pursuit of nearer satisfactions, and to the removal of those uneasinesses which it then feels, in its want of and longings after them" (2.21.60, cited under "free," "pursuit," "near," and "longing").

Johnson employs Locke's psychological explanation of what we do when we succeed or fail to behave morally whenever he, too, turns to the subject, likewise stressing how we desire and hope in time. Considering the matter "upon a philosophical estimate," Johnson asserts that "the pleasures of this life" tend to "preponderate" over "the hopes of futurity" simply because "present objects [fall] more frequently into the scale" (*Rambler* No. 7). As Johnson puts it in *Sermon* 10, "things future do not obtrude themselves upon the senses, and therefore easily give way to external objects." Moral—indeed, religious—effort must result from the arduous attempt to disengage oneself from the immediate objects that arouse our desires, and "to make the future predominate over the present." Once again, the "motives" for choosing the future over the present are no less than "the reward promised to virtue, and the terrors denounced upon crimes." But even these formidable motives "can only influence our conduct as they gain our attention." And they "gain our attention" through an act of imagination, which approximates the remote, and makes those future prospects present in our minds. These prospects must be perpetually "renovat[ed]," and "more frequently and more willingly revolved" until they gain a "forcible and permanent influence" and become "the reigning ideas, the standing principles of action, and the test by which every thing proposed to the judgment is rejected or approved" (*Rambler* No. 7). Probity, then, for Johnson, as for Locke, results from the strenuous discipline of our minds—from an ability to govern the hopes and fears that actuate our behavior, and to "select among numberless objects striving for our notice" only those which "extend our

views" to a future state and "secure our happiness" there (*Rambler* No. 78).

Johnson refines Locke's moral psychology beyond the terms Locke himself employs in "Of Power." Although Locke devotes considerable attention to memory elsewhere in the *Essay* (in passages Johnson occasionally cites), he never mentions it within the specifically ethical context of "Of Power." Memory, however, occupies a central position in Johnson's discussions of moral freedom. Indeed, Johnson argues that "the faculty of remembrance" places us "in the class of moral agents" (*Rambler* No. 41). Locke defines liberty as "a power in any agent to do or forbear any particular action, according to the determination or thought of the mind, whereby either of them is preferred to the other" (2.21.8), and Johnson cites this definition under "liberty" as well as Locke's own paraphrase of it later under "forbearance" (2.21.45). But Johnson fills in a step Locke omits by asserting that an act of remembrance is first necessary if the requisite reflecting, preferring, and determining are to take place at all. Without memory, our arena of choice is limited to the immediate: we would be helpless "for the most part to prefer one thing to another, because we could make no comparison but of objects which might both happen to be present."

Johnson's claim for memory itself seems to spring from Locke's observation earlier in the *Essay* that our other "faculties are in a great measure useless" and "our thoughts, reasonings, and knowledge, could not proceed beyond present objects, were it not for the assistance of our memories" (2.10.8). By explaining how specifically moral acts of judgment and reasoning depend on memory, Johnson is not qualifying, but is, rather, simply clarifying and then amplifying Locke's position in "Of Power." If, as Johnson explains, we were unable to retain past reflections, determinations, or wishes, we would "act only in consequence of some immediate impulse, and receive no direction from internal motives of choice." Memory, then, liberates us from the confines of the present. It "places those images before the mind upon which the judgment is to be exercised, and . . . treasures up the determinations that are once passed, as the rules of future action, or grounds of subsequent conclusions" (*Rambler* No. 41). Clearly, without an ability to consider—let alone judge and prefer—the absent, to recall past resolutions, retain past experience, and assess future consequences accordingly, our actions would be randomly impulsive, rather than freely determined on the basis of "internal motives of choice."

Johnson's somewhat punchier statement that we "fall into error and folly, not because the true principles of action are not known, but

because, for a time, they are not remembered" (*Rambler* No. 175) is therefore more than a facile maxim. The business of daily life "obliterates the impressions of piety" (*Rambler* No. 7); and "innumerable delights solicit our inclinations, and innumerable cares distract our attention" (*Idler* No. 89) away from true principles of action, principles which, not being present, can only influence us if we voluntarily conjure them up and resolve to remember the future. Memory, therefore, is not simply "the primary and fundamental power" on which "other intellectual operation[s]"—such as reason and judgment—depend (*Idler* No. 44). It is essential to all moral effort, which requires, along with reason and judgment, a "perpetual renovation of the motives to virtue" (*Rambler* No. 7). Johnson's remarks about memory and renovation in specifically religious contexts show how psychological explanations thoroughly and emphatically inform his understanding of religious effort and discipline. In *Sermon* 10, for example, he argues that it is all too easy to "abstract the thoughts from things spiritual" and hence "to forget religion" itself; in *The Life of Milton*, he warns that "religion, of which the rewards are distant" must be "invigorated and re-impressed by external ordinances" lest these distant rewards "glide by degrees out of the mind."²⁰

Johnson's exhaustive use of Locke's discussions of motivation and morality proves how misleading it is to differentiate these figures by claiming that one's interest in the mind is "scientific" while the other's is "profoundly moral."²¹ Nevertheless, even though Locke is prescriptive, and even though he did not think of his work as merely theoretical, he is probably not what we would call a "moralist." In literary studies, at least, we reserve this term almost exclusively for Johnson himself, being at a loss otherwise to describe the status of a man whose achievement was not so much to invent a moral system as to examine what moral behavior entails in every practical context he ever touched upon. Locke may admonish "that which is future will certainly come to be present" (2.21.63), but Johnson unflinchingly probes the dynamics of procrastination and short-sightedness in all their guises. Locke, moreover, does not typically dwell upon and unfold the quotidian hopes, fears, and desires that can jeopardize the free agency he is at pains to define and to urge. For example, after stating that desire is "stopped or abated by the opinion of the impossibility or unattainableness of the good proposed" (2.20.6, cited under "unattainableness"), Locke actually restrains himself from exploring the

²⁰Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 1:155.

²¹Voitle, p. 24.

phenomenon of despondency he has just described, despite its crucial bearing on the morally psychological effort he is interested in: "This might carry our thoughts further, were it seasonable in this place" (2.20.6). But it is always "seasonable" for Johnson to pursue such matters. Precisely because he does believe that "to suffer the thoughts to be vitiated, is to poison the fountains of morality," his program as a moralist is "to shew what thoughts are to be rejected, or improved, as they regard the past, present, or future" (*Rambler* No. 8). Johnson's "arduous province" is "preserving the balance of the mental constitution" (*Rambler* No. 47) so that our power to think and choose freely will not be impaired. In trying to promote the practice of virtue—a practice which, as we have seen, Johnson believes to consist of the same procedures Locke describes—Johnson develops Locke's psychology in different directions, and in his own distinctively dialectical ways. Johnson shows how the same mental processes that make moral effect possible also involve us in a double-bind; that hope, fear, memory, reflection, and imagination often actually threaten the "balance of the mental constitution" on which moral agency depends.

As W. J. Bate has shown, Johnson was preoccupied with being a "free agent," or, more precisely, with not losing the power to be so.²² The primary threats to free agency are our own thoughts and desires: "we are in danger from whatever can get possession of our thoughts" (*Rambler* No. 7). In "Of Power," Locke occasionally touches upon instances where we cannot think freely—when we are on the rack, for example, and cannot "lay by the *idea* of pain," or when "a boisterous passion hurries our thoughts . . . without leaving us the liberty of thinking on other things which we would rather choose" (2.21.12). But Johnson searches out and dwells upon instances where we do not have the liberty to think as we choose, where our minds are uncontrollably possessed, hurried, or arrested. Hope and fear themselves are particularly likely to seize our minds in this way because they easily become adhesive and eventually inhibit rather than stimulate action. Living hopefully or fearfully in the future is, first of all, our "unavoidable condition," for we "must always discover new motives of action, new excitements of fear, and allurements of desire" (*Rambler* No. 2). Secondly, as we have seen, hope and fear are the basis for religious behavior: to "live religiously" is to act "in hope of future recompense, and in fear of future punishment" (*Sermon* 10). At the same time, Johnson is acutely aware that hope and fear refer to things which do not exist yet, and which may never exist at all outside of our own desires and terrors. To dwell on hopes or fears until they engross the imagination and acquire the status of realities is, then, to indulge in

²²W. J. Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 386–87.

the dangerous power of fiction and to commit ourselves to "shackles of expectation" (*Rambler* No. 73) which are no less constraining for being entirely delusional. Johnson's remarks about hope and fear reach full circle when he warns us against "harrassing our thoughts with conjectures about things not yet in being," and when he states that the wise man has "never realized non-entities to his mind" (*Rambler* No. 29). This may seem like a sensible way to avoid anxiety, until we remember that those "non-entities" of hope and fear are also the mainsprings of action and the prompters of rectitude. By insisting that the same act of imagination which "realizes" hopes and fears in our minds is also an act of madness, Johnson suggests that all forward-looking action is immensely more difficult and problematic than Locke argued.

Conversely, while memory is implicitly necessary to moral action as Locke defines it, it is explicitly so as Johnson does. But in Johnson's hands, once again retrospection also tends to upset psychological stability and undermine free agency, especially when these recollections are traumatic or sorrowful. Locke defines sorrow as the "uneasiness in the mind upon the thought of a good lost, which might have been enjoyed longer; or the sense of a present evil" (2.20.8, cited under "sorrow"). Johnson's definition of sorrow clearly grows out of Locke's, but is developed with his distinctive emphasis on obsession:

Sorrow is properly that state of the mind in which our desires are fixed upon the past, without looking forward to the future, an incessant wish that something were otherwise than it has been, a tormenting and harrassing want of some enjoyment or possession which we have lost, and which no endeavours can possibly regain.

(*Rambler* No. 47)

The resemblances are obvious: the loss of a former enjoyment, the "uneasiness" or the "harrassing want" this loss causes us to feel. But to Johnson, sorrow itself is already obsessive and has reference only to the past. Accordingly, his definition stresses painfully futile fixation. In Johnson's definition, unlike Locke's, the good is irrecoverably lost: "no endeavours can possibly regain" it, and yet the uneasiness we still feel in its absence is "incessant" and not merely discomforting, but downright "tormenting." Our desires are so "fixed upon the past" and our thoughts, Johnson continues, so "chained down" to a "single object" which cannot be contemplated without "hopeless uneasiness," that we become immobilized and cannot look forward to the future at all. What is yet worse, even though recollection is an adjunct to moral effort, it actually tends to imperil the minds of those who are inclined to be reflective and morally scrupulous to begin with. Sorrow is espe-

cially ensnaring because it is indulged out of moral duty or tenderness, because "it is justly reproachable not to feel it" (*Rambler* No. 47) on certain occasions.

Johnson, then, is both delicate and firm in exhorting us to give over sorrowful, disappointed, or guilty remembrances as "not only useless, but culpable" (*Rambler* No. 47). The compulsively despondent remembrance of "that pain which never can end in pleasure" inhibits amendment and represses purposeful, forward-looking effort by locking our minds in the irretrievably past. It hinders the mind from functioning "without incumbrance" and interferes with our "power . . . of transferring the attention as judgment shall direct" (*Idler* No. 72). When describing how our lives are filled up with the pursuits of successive desires to which fashion, habit, and education have accustomed us, Locke writes,

A very little part of our life is so vacant from these *uneasinesses* as to leave us free to the attraction of remoter, absent good. We are seldom at ease and free enough from the solicitation of our natural or adopted desires, but a constant succession of *uneasinesses*, out of that stock which natural wants or acquired habits have heaped up, take the *will* in their turns.

(2.21.45, cited under "vacant," "adopt," and "acquire")

Johnson agrees that we neglect intrinsically greater goods while busying ourselves with trifles. In *Adventurer* No. 119, he similarly comments upon our bustling "persuit of imaginary good," the lack of which "torments us not in proportion to its real value, but according to the estimation by which we have rated it in our own minds." But given that "the business of life is to move forwards" (*Idler* No. 72), even the ludicrously minute but "well-intended labours" of the virtuoso (*Rambler* No. 83), or all the "popular and modish trifles" which, despite their insignificance, preserve the multitudes of London from idleness (*Adventurer* No. 67) are vastly to be preferred to paralyzing fixation upon the past. It is far better that those "vacancies" be filled up with trifling diversions than left open to the intrusion of either hopelessly sorrowful or anxiously expectant uneasiness. Significantly, it is on Locke's authority that Johnson recommends the almost therapeutic cultivation of manual arts in *Rambler* No. 85. Referring to Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Johnson urges that the thoughtful and the idle relax their minds by "slighter attention to some mechanical operation" and protect their thoughts from "vagrance and dissipation" by finding some "allurement . . . that may engage application without anxiety." Johnson shares Locke's concern to preserve the mind from the internal obstructions or dissipations to which it is all too prone. But Johnson's far greater and more conspicuous anxiety

that any desire or fear, whether retrospective or prospective, can be obsessive inclines him to sanction trifling employments in the present. In fact, the more trifling the better, for even these will grow despotic if they engage the passions too intently. Virtuosi have been known to "pine with envy at the flowers of another man's parterre" and to "hover like vultures round the owner of a fossil, in hopes to plunder his cabinet at his death" (*Adventurer* No. 119).

One final broad distinction remains to be made. In "Of Power" Locke essentially argues that what Johnson calls "the choice of eternity" should be and, more importantly, can be our "choice of life." The prospect of an afterlife, with its rewards and punishments, is so probable that we can bring the image of this remote good near to our minds and, by developing the proper habits of forbearance, and by training the desires to hanker after the proper objects, we can actually prefer and pursue it instead of nearer, merely temporal, hopes and fears. But in some of Johnson's works, at least, the question "Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?" does not receive nearly so comfortable or so decided an answer.²³ Taking the same starting point about our drive for happiness, Johnson withholds the possibility of pursuing durable happiness from the characters in *Rasselas*, characters who are earnest searchers after true bliss, not triflers, sensualists, or—once the astronomer is cured—madmen. The "choice of eternity," while held out and even resolved upon the penultimate chapter, cannot be pursued because it cannot be imagined, or brought nearer to our minds and steadfastly kept before our view as the choice of life. Instead, the young travellers resume their hopeful fantasies which, they now know, will never be fulfilled, and the wiser, not even attempting to aim for eternity, are simply content "to be driven along the stream of life without directing their course to any particular port" (*Rasselas*, ch. 49). That remote good, considered now not only as an incentive to virtue, but also as the objective of our pursuits, seems in Johnson's hands to be so much more remote that it is almost inaccessible.²⁴

Locke had placed the exercise of our liberty in that period of time between desiring and actually determining our wills to pursue or forbear our desire, with full confidence that during this time we can

²³"Vanity of Human Wishes," line 343.

²⁴For a discussion of Johnson's use of the argument from desire in order to prove the immortality of the soul, see Robert G. Walker, *Eighteenth-Century Arguments for Immortality and Johnson's Rasselas*, English Literary Studies (Victoria, B.C.: Univ. of Victoria Press, 1977). Charles E. Pierce, Jr., also places *Rasselas* in the context of Johnson's religious thought in "The Conflict of Faith and Fear in Johnson's Moral Writing," *ECS* 15 (Spring 1982):317–38.

choose the ultimate, remote good, so long as we examine and reflect carefully and judiciously. But to Johnson, the proper choice is scarcely available to us and is therefore almost impossible to prefer. For this reason, Johnson cannot look down upon vainly wishing and wrongly choosing humanity, or chide us for failing to direct our wishes towards durable happiness. Moreover, the time for reflection that we have between desiring and determining our wills is itself apt to be troublesome. Without the opening for liberty this time provides, we would be incapable of determining and pursuing reasoned choices and would be subject to whatever external circumstances the present moment happens to offer: we would have a "mean flexibility to every impulse" (*Rambler* No. 6), and would necessarily commit "the balance of choice to the management of caprice" (*Rambler* No. 178). However, the time of suspension between desiring and willing is also "vacancy"—to employ Johnson's characteristic term. It is a time of idleness and inaction which leaves us vulnerable to the fetters of recollection on one side, and anticipation on the other. And, even if we can maintain our equilibrium amidst these contrary attractions, there is always the danger that, in "too scrupulously balanc[ing] probabilities, and too perspicaciously foresee[ing] obstacles" (*Rambler* No. 43), we may remain in a state of reflective undetermination indefinitely, without engaging our wills and venturing forward. In short, Johnson is, if anything, not less but more skeptical and unassured than Locke. While asserting, as Locke does, that moral action must have reference to futurity, Johnson is doubtful about the possible bearing the future good can have on our present choices and preferences; while also censuring shortsightedness and impulsiveness, he is more anxious about the hazards reflection and circumspection expose us to; while insisting on our power as free agents, he is far more apprehensive about our ability to think and act freely. Johnson's re-channelling of Locke's ideas does not so much challenge Locke's position about moral effort as it questions our own capacity to live according to it.

"Of Modes of Pleasure and Pain" and "Of Power" search out the "motives of action" and "unfold the seminal principles of vice and virtue." For Johnson, this was always a delicate subject, and the fact that these two chapters in particular were clearly favored texts testifies to his satisfaction with them. This information surely does not permit us to conclude that Johnson somehow "got" all his ideas about psychology from Locke; nor does it suggest that Locke was Johnson's only concern. What it does mean is that Johnson extended a moral authority to these works, and that we need not be so defensive about placing Locke in Johnson's philosophical company. Johnson's respect for Locke's moral psychology belies the still common view of Locke as a pernicious skeptic busily undermining all the sacred truths about

religion and morality that Johnson, the die-hard, conservative believer, was desperately trying to uphold. Far from being morally or religiously threatening, Locke actually influenced Johnson's interest in the problematic vanity of human wishing, reinforced his effort to give the religious doctrines of reward and punishment a psychological underpinning in our own natural impulses of hope and fear, and stimulated his commitment to promoting "the moral discipline of the mind" (*Rambler* No. 8).