

SAMUEL JOHNSON'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND  
ITS RELATION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF FRANCIS BACON

by

MAURICE WILLIAM KENT

B.A., University of British Columbia, 1967

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department  
of  
ENGLISH

We accept this thesis as conforming to the  
required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

August, 1971

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study.

I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Head of my Department or by his representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of English

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver 8, Canada

Date August 18, 1971.

## ABSTRACT

Samuel Johnson's literary reputation in his own day was built largely upon his work as a moralist; consequently, the moral stance which forms the basis of this reputation merits more attention than it has hitherto received. It is my purpose in this thesis to establish that Johnson's moral writings, so highly rated by his contemporaries, reveal a distinctive quality of mind and a characteristic moral approach which links the author to the writings and to the moral thought of Francis Bacon.

In establishing this connection, the first stage in this thesis is the isolation of common factors in the backgrounds of both men which could lead to a molding of moral attitudes into similar patterns. This is followed by an investigation of the effects of environmental influences and personal tastes which could draw Johnson to the moralist in Francis Bacon. More concrete evidence is sought in Johnson's Dictionary, a work which serves not only as a gauge of Johnson's moral thought but also as a measure of how closely his thought is aligned with that of Francis Bacon.

The essays of the two moralists are examined to disclose the drive which directs their moral philosophy into a common path, a path which, leading away from all considerations of the theoretical to the practical service of their fellow man, derives from the same fixed principle of Christian charity. In following this principle of service, both men recognized

the value of the essay and the biographical form as instruments of moral instruction; both utilized them as such in a pioneering fashion.

Francis Bacon believed that the task of bringing the mind to virtue required, as a prerequisite, a study of the mind and its disorders. Johnson undertakes such a study along the lines envisaged by Bacon, and, in Rasselas, he is shown to be following the methods and directions of the earlier philosopher. Also investigated is the evident parallelism in their mutual concern to protect the mind from the errors of fallacious reasoning. Francis Bacon, in The Coulers of Good and Evill, had made an important contribution to the ethics of evaluation in devising a method of exposing and destroying the fallacies of sophistical reasoning; Samuel Johnson, in his review of Soame Jenyns' study of evil, illustrates a practical application of this previously neglected method in the logical demolition of one of the dominant myths of eighteenth-century society.

The conclusion drawn from this presentation is that, even where direct influences cannot be ascribed, the evidence indicates powerful affinities in thought and in qualities of mind which draw Samuel Johnson to a similar approach to moral philosophy as that of Francis Bacon and result in similar conclusions about morals.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. AIMS AND PURPOSES . . . . .	1
II. BACON AND JOHNSON: AREAS OF CONTACT . . . . .	5
III. BACON AND JOHNSON: PRACTICAL MORALISTS . . . . .	11
IV. JOHNSON'S <u>DICTIONARY</u> . . . . .	24
V. THE MORAL ESSAYS . . . . .	50
VI. JOHNSON AND BACON ON THE DISTURBED MIND . . . . .	69
VII. THE ETHICS OF EVALUATION . . . . .	87
VIII. CONCLUSION . . . . .	103
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	107

## CHAPTER I

### AIMS AND PURPOSES

When a contemporary of Samuel Johnson referred to him as "the first moralist of the age," the laudatory words were not without validity, for it is primarily in the role of moralist that Johnson built his literary reputation in his own day. His moral essays, particularly those of The Rambler, comprise the major components in the building of this reputation; they are the works in which "the great moralist," as Boswell called him, reveals much of his ethical position; they are also the works which Johnson himself believed would be treasured by posterity above all his other writings. Unfortunately for Johnson's sanguine expectations, modern popular taste turns away from the rather sombre moralizing of The Rambler and turns instead to the essence of the author's genius which it finds distilled in his later works, such as The Lives of the Poets, and turns also to the ever-fascinating study of his character as revealed in Boswell's great Life. Nevertheless, to see Johnson whole it is necessary to see him within the context of his period and to grasp the ethical stance which formed a vital element of his being, a stance which, for himself and for his contemporaries, had the utmost relevance and the highest degree of importance.

Because this moral stance, like the man himself, is highly individualistic, it defies any attempt at neat

categorization. Johnson disliked systems, metaphysics, and theorists, and with a greater emphasis upon hard-headed practicality than upon consistency in his judgments, he applied to the moral theories of his age the touchstone of his rationalism and the overriding authority of revelation.

Although it cannot be said that Johnson's moral philosophy developed into an integrated system or that it fathered any philosophical school, it nevertheless assumes a definable pattern of moral belief which emerges from the totality of his writings. Is this philosophic pattern original with Johnson or is it derivative? And, if the latter, what is the primary source? To hazard judgments regarding the sources of an author's thought or upon the influences that have played upon his mind is always a dangerous undertaking, particularly so in the case of Samuel Johnson. His mind was not only steeped in the classics of Western civilization but had also ranged widely among the myriad bypaths of literature and, further, was a mind buttressed by a remarkably retentive memory which could always reach back into the prodigious body of his reading to snatch, even from an obscure source, the apt quotation or the memorable phrase.

It is evident, therefore, that in considering Samuel Johnson's moral philosophy, the shaping influences of that philosophy must be sought within the context of the entire two-thousand-year heritage of Classical, Christian, and Christian Humanist thought. In addition, and not to be

overlooked, are those influences which he breathed from the air around him, influences, for example, such as Hobbism or Utilitarianism, which could have their effect enhanced by virtue of being current or popular.

Without discounting the above reservations, it is my intention to demonstrate that there are strong parallels to be drawn between the practical bent of the Johnsonian moral philosophy and the equally practical cast of the moral philosophy of Sir Francis Bacon, the great scientist-philosopher of the Jacobean Age. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the prestige of Bacon was, after a period of partial eclipse, again in the ascendant; and, in a minor sense, the writings of Johnson could be said to reflect a strong contemporary interest in the philosophy of the earlier figure; in a major sense they reflect the powerful affinities in thought and in attributes of the two moralists.

I propose, first, to establish this relationship and then, secondly, to demonstrate that similar predetermining factors direct the moral philosophy of both men away from considerations of the theoretical to a primary focus upon the entirely practical end of bringing man into the straight way of truth and virtue. Thirdly, I will show that Johnson consistently follows this end, and, just as consistently, his writings reflect both the influence and the comparable purpose of Francis Bacon. Finally, I propose to show that, time and time again, the moral writings of Johnson not only



complement the moral philosophy of Bacon but also expand the scope of that philosophy to encompass new fields prefigured or adumbrated in the latter's work.

In developing this pattern of presentation, I will be concentrating in Chapter II upon the comparable elements in the backgrounds, in the attainments, and in the attributes of the two moralists, elements which could induce Johnson to find the moral philosophy of Bacon congenial. In making these comparisons, it is my intention to establish a context in which the evidence to be drawn from the works of both moralists will appear in a meaningful perspective. Chapter III seeks to establish, first, that the moral philosophy of both Bacon and Johnson is based upon the selfsame rationale of practical service to one's fellow man and, secondly, that this service is undertaken in compliance with the dictates of Christian charity. In Chapter IV, certain aspects of Johnson's moral stance are explored. The frequency of his use of Baconian quotations in the Dictionary, and their application to important philosophical concepts, are also cited as illustrating how closely his moralistic approach approximates that of Francis Bacon. In succeeding chapters the search for further evidence to support this correlation is expanded and is carried into areas which are of vital importance to the moral philosophy of both men.

## CHAPTER II

### BACON AND JOHNSON: AREAS OF CONTACT

At first glance there would appear to be few points of similarity between the career of Bacon and that of Johnson; nevertheless, there are many points of contact in the background and in the attainments of the two men, all of which could predispose Johnson to feel an affinity with the earlier figure. As young men entering upon their respective careers in the city of London, both carried the handicap of ill-health and an unprepossessing appearance. This parallelism of situation is more apparent than real: Bacon, scion of the most powerful official of the realm, had all of the advantages that an influential family and powerful connections can provide in smoothing the path of preferment for an ambitious man; and, in addition, he possessed the temperament and the will to exploit these advantages to the full and to trim his sails to every favourable wind. Johnson, in contrast, was the son of a humble book-seller and, with neither friends nor connections, he bore the additional disadvantage of a stubborn independence of mind which rebelled at currying favour. Though circumstances made more difficult the task of Johnson, both men rose in their chosen fields by sheer ability, and facility with the pen was a major factor in Bacon's rise even as it was the primary factor for Johnson.

This facility with the pen was not unearned; in their respective backgrounds was an interrupted university career

during which both had rebelled against a stultifying curriculum but, notwithstanding, had gained a tremendous amount of knowledge. Bacon was certainly on a par with Johnson in scholarly attainment and in his knowledge of the classics and of the Bible. A master of the media of communications, Bacon was a great creative stylist in English prose and was no less famed in his day for his mastery of Latin. In choosing a public role Bacon had, of necessity, to master the art of suasive speech; this he did so successfully that of his parliamentary speeches Ben Jonson could write: "The fear of every man was, lest he should make an end."<sup>1</sup>

Although Samuel Johnson shunned any public role, he too was a master of words and, if not a great orator, he was indisputably the greatest conversationalist of his age. He shared Bacon's high regard for Latin; and his mastery of the language was such that he has been called "one of the greatest Latinists of modern times."<sup>2</sup> Like Bacon before him, he created a new style of English prose, a prose represented characteristically by the "Johnsonese" of The Rambler. The particular quality of these essays lies in their masterful use of language and, though the prose is uniquely Johnsonian, there is a reliance upon the skillful use of balance and of

---

<sup>1</sup>Ben Jonson, Timber or Discoveries, ed. F. E. Schelling (Boston: 1892), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Jackson Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 15.

antithesis which recalls the similar skill of Bacon. A modern study of philosophic words employed in The Rambler has shown the high degree of artistry with which Johnson has structured his sentences and how, in the use of philosophic terms, he has drawn upon the scientific and philosophic vocabulary of the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

This interest in the science and in the philosophy of the previous century was a reflection of the times, and Johnson could be expected to respond to the "wave of appreciation" which arose for Bacon in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> That he did so respond, and that he saw Bacon primarily as a philosopher, can be inferred from the comment he makes on Mallet's introduction to the 1740 edition of Bacon's Works:<sup>5</sup>

It is written with elegance, perhaps with some affection; but with so much more knowledge of history than of science, that when he afterwards undertook the Life of Marlborough, Warburton remarked, that he might perhaps forget that Marlborough was a general, as he had forgotten that Bacon was a philosopher.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>W. K. Wimsatt, Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the "Rambler" and "Dictionary" of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948).

<sup>4</sup>J. C. Crowther, Francis Bacon: the First Statesman of Science (London: The Cresset Press, 1960), p. xii.

<sup>5</sup>It is from the volumes of this edition that Johnson drew thousands of illustrations in compiling the Dictionary. See Gordon S. Haight, "Johnson's Copy of Bacon's Works," Yale University Library Gazette, vi (1932), pp. 67-73.

<sup>6</sup>Samuel Johnson, "Life of Mallet," Lives of the Poets, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), III, 404.

The community of interests and of attributes which Johnson shared with Bacon could well bind him to the latter's influence. Another possible bond could be his sense of identification with one who had suffered under poverty as he himself had suffered, even where, as in the case of Bacon, probity had not been proof against its subversive power. In Adventurer 131 Johnson discusses the paradoxical nature of Bacon: as moralist he condemns the sinner but as realist he gives due weight to the compulsions which impel the sin:

Bacon, after he had added to a long and careful contemplation of almost every other object of knowledge a curious inspection into common life, and after having surveyed nature as a philosopher, had examined 'Men's business and bosoms' as a statesman; yet failed so much in the conduct of domestic affairs, that in the most lucrative post to which a great and wealthy kingdom could advance him, he felt all the miseries of a distressful poverty; and committed all the crimes to which poverty incites. Such were at once his negligence and rapacity, that, as it is said, he would gain by unworthy practices that money which, when so acquired, his servants might steal from one end of the table, while he sat studious and abstracted at the other.

As scarcely any man has reached the excellence, very few have sunk to the weakness of Bacon . . .<sup>7</sup>

For this weakness "to which poverty incites," Johnson shows throughout his life the sympathy and understanding of one who knows first hand the oppressive weight of poverty and also the powerful constraints which it imposes upon moral

---

<sup>7</sup>Johnson, Works; "The Idler" and "The Adventurer," eds. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, L. F. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press), II (1963), 482. All references to The Rambler are to Vols. III-IV-V of this edition, eds. W. J. Bate, Albrecht B. Strauss (1969).

rectitude. In his critical review of Soame Jenyns' A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil, he attacks bitterly the smug complacency implicit in the author's attitude toward poverty, and the euphemistic definition of the term as "want of riches," a sense in which Johnson states, "every man in his opinion may be poor." "Life must be seen before it can be known" he adds, and, in describing the poverty occasioned by lack of sufficiency, he reveals his own awareness that the poverty of a man such as Bacon, who can never live within his means, is no less compelling than the poverty occasioned by want of necessities.

When Bacon was charged with accepting bribes, his only defense was that such bribes had not been allowed to influence his judgment; ironically enough, when Johnson was accused by his enemies of accepting a bribe in the form of a Hanoverian pension, he had recourse to the same defense. Doubly ironic is the fact that Johnson, in compiling the Dictionary, had defined the word "pension" as follows: "An allowance made to anyone without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country."

With his own words thrown in his teeth, Johnson must have realized that his defense, though valid enough and, as in the case of Bacon, the only possible one in the circumstances, would carry no more weight with detractors than had Bacon's similar defense in a previous age.

I have attempted to trace the influences, the common interests, and the shared attributes which might have drawn Samuel Johnson to the philosophy of Francis Bacon in a period of resurgence of interest in the latter figure and in his philosophic thought. The evidence which I have educed to support the possibility of such an attraction is, of course, circumstantial; however, it is also cumulative and lends support to the more substantial evidence to be drawn from the works of Johnson. It is sufficient, at this point, to indicate the strong possibility of such a connection; to pursue the question of possible influences into byways of increasingly tenuous supposition would not be profitable; therefore, it is appropriate to turn now to more solid ground, to the evidence of the works of both moralists, and through that evidence to isolate the common factors in their approach to ethical questions.

### CHAPTER III

#### BACON AND JOHNSON: PRACTICAL MORALISTS

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Johnson's approach to moral philosophy is the hard-headed practicality which we have already cited; it is a practicality which has its full counterpart in the moral approach of the worldly-wise Francis Bacon. In the case of both moralists the emphasis upon the practical is fundamental, and is accompanied by a compensatory downgrading of the role of the theoretical. In fact, if there is one common factor which can be traced more consistently than any other in the moral writings or utterances of Bacon and of Johnson, it is their mutual aversion to all dogmatic systems and to all fine-spun theorizing. Whether it be Bacon inveighing against the magisterial words of Aristotle, or Johnson thundering at the hapless Boswell to clear his mind of cant, there is the same implicit awareness of the dangerous authority of systems and of prescriptive words over man's reason.

For metaphysical speculation, and for the disputes which it engendered, they exhibited a similar distaste. For example: is there free will? To Bacon, this is a question which, as a moralist, he is required neither to raise nor to answer; it is one of those issues which he finds "fruitful of controversies, but barren of effects," issues to be ignored where possible or to be relegated to the province of theology. To Johnson, the mere raising of such issues would arouse both his



impatience and his dogmatism, qualities clearly apparent in the peremptory words which he used to silence a dispute over the question: "Sir, we know our will is free, and there's an end on't." His words on the subject at another occasion afford a more temperate response: "All theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it." This response illustrates what is a characteristic reaction of Johnson when faced with fundamental contradictions between the evidence afforded by theory and that afforded by experience. On such occasions, he is at one with Bacon in leaning consistently to the evidence brought forth by experience, always provided that such evidence is congruent with the revealed truth of Divinity.

These examples illustrate, in brief, what is a characteristic and constant rejection of the theoretical in the moral philosophy of both men. The incidence of this important factor, and the consequent direction which it imparts to their work, warrants an investigation of the premises upon which it is based.

Francis Bacon, whose lofty purpose was the encompassment of all knowledge, held a vision of a future state in which man, freed of his inveterate tendency to worship false idols, would be enabled to apprehend truth and reality through the agency of the Baconian method of inductive science. Hide-bound tradition, Aristotelian deduction, and syllogism would be replaced by inductive research and experiment; the essential would be replaced by the functional and the abstract by

the concrete; contemplation would be subordinated to action; knowledge and mastery of the material world would be the goal achieved. The fruit of such knowledge and mastery is power, power to be employed "for the benefit and use of man." The Baconian goal is nobly conceived, but barring the road to its achievement stand the entrenched metaphysical systems of the schoolmen, reinforced by the strictures of the church regarding forbidden knowledge. Bacon has a fair target in the empty polemic, the quiddities, and the rigid Aristotelianism of the schoolmen, and he attacks their position vigorously; the church, however, by virtue of its position, is immune from frontal attack and must be approached with some circumspection. How is he to establish that the study of science, rather than smacking of the satanic, actually has divine sanction? And, having established this point, how is he then to preserve science unalloyed by the admixture of the anti-thetic element of religion, while at the same time he stoutly maintains the truth of Holy Writ? His solution is to insist upon a twofold way to the apprehension of God: through the way of revelation, the Book of His word, and through the way of study of the material world, the Book of His works. In effect, he compartmentalizes religion and, by insisting upon the sacrosanct nature of the truth of revelation, he effectively elevates it to a state of splendid isolation, above any consideration of, or any interference with, the more mundane route to God through the study of His handiwork.

"Render unto faith the things that are faith's,"<sup>8</sup> says Bacon, and he freely consigns all things spiritual to the realm of theology. By so doing he hopes to preclude any interference of dogmatic religion with what really interests him: the scientific study of mankind and his relation to the practical world.

These, then, are the issues to which Bacon responds as he clears the path for his practical philosophy. He brushes aside as of no moment the speculative and metaphysical pre-occupations of the schools; and, somewhat incongruously, he makes his obeisance to a theology which he has effectively "kicked upstairs" in order to forestall any obstruction of his own primary interests.

The sincerity of Bacon's religious protestations might be open to some doubt; of the sincerity of Johnson's religious convictions there is no question. He clung to his faith with the grim determination of one who saw in it his one firm warranty amidst an otherwise meaningless flux of existence. If he derived some assurance from his orthodoxy, he derived little comfort; for he was tortured by an innate scepticism which drove him unremittingly to find justification in reason to buttress that which he had to believe on faith. Reason, however, though it might temper and complement his faith,

---

<sup>8</sup>Francis Bacon, The Works of Francis Bacon, eds. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, D. D. Heath (London: Longman & Co., 1870), I, lxv. All references to Bacon's works are to this edition.

could not dominate it; since, as he said in the Vision of Theodore, Reason, though "of all subordinate beings the noblest and the greatest,"<sup>9</sup> is but the handmaid of religion. His religion formed an integral part of his moral philosophy, and its pervasive influence is apparent in the religious basis for the constant emphasis which he places upon the general rather than upon the particular. The business of the poet, says Imlac: "is to examine, not the individual, but the species, to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip."<sup>10</sup>

What Imlac has applied to the function of the poet, Johnson would also apply to the student of philosophy. By confining itself to the study of the general, the mind is instructed and preserves its balance; conversely, when the proud mind turns to specialization and to the study of particulars, the balance is lost and the individual, self-deluded, weaves vain theories and creates false systems. It is upon the basis of this, their fundamental error, that Johnson's dislike of theorists and systematizers was built; his comparable dislike for metaphysicians was built not so much upon their error but rather upon their irrelevancy. This attitude of Johnson is described aptly in the words of Bertrand Bronson:

---

<sup>9</sup>Selections from Samuel Johnson, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 63.

<sup>10</sup>Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, chap. x.

His dislike of the metaphysician does not arise from a rationalizing of his own intellectual inferiority. He believed that the farthest one could go in philosophy was not far enough to penetrate ultimate obscurities or make any practical difference to humanity. Metaphysical systems exist in a vacuum; while the tremendous mysteries of life and death beat, every hour, inexorably at man's door. The first could be put aside; the latter could not be ignored.<sup>11</sup>

To summarize: in responding to rigid theoretical positions and to prescriptive systems which directly challenge their own moral philosophy, Bacon and Johnson throw full weight behind the counterbalancing levers of rationality and practicality. For both men the operative motive is the same, but is based upon a scale of values graduated on a different order of priorities: that of Bacon implicitly ordered to the primacy of natural philosophy; that of Johnson explicitly ordered to the primacy of religion.

How, then, does the natural philosophy of Bacon measure on Johnson's order of priorities? His unequivocal answer to this question appears in the Life of Milton:

The knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind. Whether we provide for action or conversation . . . the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong . . . We are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance. Our intercourse with intellectual nature is necessary; our speculations upon matter are voluntary, and at leisure. . . . the innovators whom I oppose are turning off attention from

---

<sup>11</sup>Bertrand H. Bronson, Johnson Agonistes and Other Essays (Cambridge: University Press, 1946), p. 40.

life to nature. They seem to think, that we are placed here to watch the growth of plants, or the motions of the stars.<sup>12</sup>

This does not mean that Johnson lacked sympathetic understanding of the methods and the aims of experimental science. I have previously cited his reliance upon the evidence afforded by experience, and, although he would not hold experience to be the sole structural agency in the building of learning, it was, to him, "the foundation of all knowledge."<sup>13</sup> That he fully comprehended some of the important implications of seventeenth-century science is apparent in the approval he expresses for one of its key principles, a principal drawn from Bacon and restated by Locke:

The chief art of learning, as Locke has observed, is to attempt but little at a time. The widest excursions of the mind are made by short flights frequently repeated; the most lofty fabricks of science are formed by the continual accumulation of single propositions.<sup>14</sup>

Another passage, drawn from an earlier work, the Life of Boerhaave, provides his most explicit endorsement of the Baconian scientific method. He is speaking in words of admiration of the principles of Boerhaave:

---

<sup>12</sup>Lives, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, I, 99-100.

<sup>13</sup>Jean H. Hagstrum, Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1952), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup>Rambler 137; Works, IV, 361.

When he laid down his office of governour of the university, in 1715, he made an oration upon the subject of "attaining to certainty in natural philosophy;" in which he declares, in the strongest terms, in favour of experimental knowledge; and reflects, with just severity, upon those arrogant philosophers, who are too easily disgusted with the slow methods of obtaining true notions by frequent experiments; and who, possessed with too high an opinion of their own abilities, rather choose to consult their own imaginations, than inquire into nature, and are better pleased with the charming amusement of forming hypotheses, than the toilsome drudgery of making observations.

The emptiness and uncertainty of all those systems, whether venerable for their antiquity, or agreeable for their novelty, he has evidently shown; and not only declared, but proved, that we are entirely ignorant of the principles of things, and that all the knowledge we have, is of such qualities alone as are discoverable by experience, or such as may be deduced from them by mathematical demonstration.<sup>15</sup>

Johnson was well read in the sciences, and his interests embraced a broad field; nevertheless, by no stretch of the imagination could he be considered a scientist. He was a dabbler in scientific experiment in a period when such amateur experimentation was made popular by the scientific activities of the Royal Society, activities satirically epitomized (and with some justice) in the Swiftian projectors of Lagado. For the men who were actually advancing the frontiers of science and philosophy in his own day, Johnson, with rare exceptions, had neither appreciation nor sympathy; to him they were "vain innovators," and their achievements and their speculations he either ignored or belittled.

---

<sup>15</sup>Works (Troy, New York: Pafraets Book Co., 1908), XIV, pp. 169-70.

This fundamental misapprehension of the true bent of the scientific impulse was a failing he shared, surprisingly enough, with Sir Francis Bacon. The latter, despite his great reputation as a scientist, also lacked appreciation for the men who were making the great scientific discoveries of his day. He paid little attention to the discoveries of Galileo and of Kepler: he spoke slightingly of Gilbert's work on the magnet; and of Harvey's study of the circulation of the blood he paid no heed, even though Harvey was his personal physician. Bacon's own role in science was "to indicate with fine magniloquence the path by which alone 'science' could advance;"<sup>16</sup> his one great and abiding achievement as a scientist was to impress permanently upon science the necessity for sound methodology and for accurate and detailed experimentation. Where he erred was in assuming an almost mechanical certainty for an inductive method which demanded much of the powers of observation but little of the faculties of reason and of imagination. It was through his distrust of these sometimes vagrant faculties that Bacon failed to foresee the vital role to be played in the advancement of science by the intuitive leap of the mind in the formation of hypotheses.

Samuel Johnson, harbouring a similar distrust of unconstrained discursive reason and of unbridled imagination, follows Bacon in underrating the importance of hypotheses in

---

<sup>16</sup>Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background (New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1953), p. 34.



the field of science. This is apparent in the above quotation from the Life of Boerhaave when he speaks disparagingly of those "arrogant philosophers" who "are better pleased with the charming amusement of forming hypotheses, than the toilsome drudgery of making observations."

This is an attitude which might be admirable if it had application only to the dilettantes of science and of philosophy; unfortunately, it is a blanket condemnation which Johnson applies without discrimination to a Hume and to a Berkeley, as well as to a Jenyns.

From the investigation of this particular area of myopia, it is apparent that both philosophers erred in the same manner: Bacon, through a too-rigid adherence to a methodology; Johnson through a desperate need to preserve inviolate an orthodoxy. In this one negative instance, as well as in the more positive factors, the two moralists are linked together by a drive which impels them to a like concentration upon practical morality. What, then, is this motivational drive which results in so patent a correlation? It is my contention that, in the case of both Bacon and Johnson, this drive is rooted in the compulsive need to render a practical application of the selfsame principle of Christian charity; and it is this Christian virtue of charity which forms the cornerstone of their practical morality.

This, it must be emphasized, is charity in the theological sense, not a vague humanitarianism but a positive

adherence to the teachings of Christ, with the primary objective of obtaining salvation. Whatever were Bacon's feelings regarding the all-powerful Church of his day, there is no doubt that when he speaks of charity as the greatest "of all virtues and dignities of the mind"<sup>17</sup> he is speaking as a practising Christian of a fundamental principle of his moral philosophy, one which "recognizes as a supreme rule of conduct the Augustinian principle of charity . . . ."<sup>18</sup> This is the basic moral premise to which Johnson also fully subscribed; for, as Christian and as moralist, he also held charity "to be the highest Christian virtue . . . the cornerstone of Christianity."<sup>19</sup> For him, the practise of charity was the "great test" by which man is to be judged; it is a test which the evidence of his life and the evidence of his works give assurance he would pass with flying colours; both bear witness to the "large compassionate ideal of human development that is always the concern of Johnson, as a moralist, a critic, or an educator . . . ."<sup>20</sup>

It is true that Johnson was compassionate; it is true

---

<sup>17</sup>"Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature," Essays; Works, VII, 403.

<sup>18</sup>F. H. Anderson, The Philosophy of Francis Bacon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 53.

<sup>19</sup>Maurice J. Quinlan, Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp. 108-9.

<sup>20</sup>Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, p. 164.

also that he had empathy for the unfortunate; however, for the cult of sentiment and for the irrational faith in the natural goodness of man he had no sympathy. He hated a "feeler," and he saw no virtue in the natural benevolence of David Hume, divorced as it was from Christian roots. Charity was, for him, stern duty enjoined by scripture and, when he gathered and supported under his roof a group of unloveable and quarrelsome social misfits, he was donning the hair shirt which chastens pride, while at the same time he was exercising Christian charity, and satisfying his own natural compassion.

"Seek the good of other men,"<sup>21</sup> says Bacon, and with these authoritative words he epitomizes the animating spirit of his own moral philosophy and that of Johnson. Bacon's investigations in the field of natural science are dedicated to the service of his moral philosophy, just as the efforts of Johnson, the writer, are dedicated to the service of Johnson, the moralist. Working from the same basic premises, both philosophers follow the dictates of Christian charity in devoting their moral efforts to the practical reformation of man and of man's lot in this world. Johnson, although he fully subscribes to the principles and to the empirical methods of Baconian science, assigns to the study of natural history a low priority relative to what he calls the "first requisite": the "religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong." If

---

<sup>21</sup>"Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature," Essays; Works, VII, 404.

the strengths of Bacon's moral philosophy have their counterparts in the moral philosophy of Samuel Johnson, so also do his weaknesses, for example: a strong bias against the theoretical causes both men to undervalue the importance of speculative reasoning in the advancement of knowledge.

Further supporting evidence for these conclusions will become manifest in the examination of the studies of both authors. The first of these studies to be examined is Samuel Johnson's Dictionary, a work from the prosaic field of lexicography which, surprisingly enough, reveals a great deal of the author's scholarly interests and the direction of his thought, as well as the influences which played upon his mind.

CHAPTER IV  
JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

One might expect that, when Samuel Johnson undertook the pedestrian task of compiling a dictionary, his particular touch of genius would cause new life to spring forth from the hitherto barren ground of lexicography. Such, indeed, is the case. The great Dictionary, although begun as a primarily commercial venture, is imbued throughout with his powerful personality.

It is the personal quality of the work which must be stressed; for, encompassing as it does the entire range of the English language of his day, we have in large part his personal associations for every word revealed either in definition or in illustrative quotation. Further, where his own feelings are deeply involved, his opinions are expressed fearlessly and without any pretence of objectivity. To his monumental task Johnson brought his vast knowledge, his originality of thought, and, as we have already illustrated in his definition of the word "pension," all of his prejudices. "Lexicographer--a harmless drudge" is Johnson's own wryly humorous definition of the term, but never was there another lexicographer such as Johnson. He faced every word "as a new and unavoidable challenge,"<sup>22</sup> and from his vast

---

<sup>22</sup>Ian Watt, "Dr. Johnson and the Literature of Experience," Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 19.

funded store of reading he drew illustrative quotations in a manner which was not only original but was also highly significant to the advancement of lexicography, as the words of Gordon S. Haight bear witness:

In the whole history of lexicography from the fifteenth century to the days of the New English Dictionary there has been no greater advance than Johnson's attempt to illustrate the history of words by quoting from the authors who used them; for conceiving this principle and carrying it out, no matter how imperfectly, he deserves all honor.<sup>23</sup>

Through the employment of the principle of selective choice in his illustrative citations, Johnson discloses those influences which, in all likelihood, served to shape his own personal experience. He drew frequently upon the bank of his memory for his quotations, and these quotations, so fixed in the memory that they can be recalled at will, have their own significance in revealing Johnson's habitual thought patterns. In all cases the task of his amanuenses was merely that of transcription; the scrupulous Johnson invariably did his own reading and marked his own selections for copying.<sup>24</sup> It is this very conscientiousness in Johnson's approach which makes the Dictionary so uniquely important an instrument; "no other literary man ever left a more explicit and available record of his reading for a long period in a body of important

---

<sup>23</sup>"Johnson's Copy of Bacon's Works," Yale University Library Gazette, vi (1932), 73.

<sup>24</sup>See W. B. C. Watkins, Johnson and English Poetry Before 1660 (Princeton University Press, 1936), pp. 23-24.

literature."<sup>25</sup>

It is what Johnson has sifted and chosen to record from this vast body of reading which makes the Dictionary so important a source of evidence regarding Johnson's opinions in those areas to which he is deeply committed, such as moral philosophy. In other areas, where his concern is not so deep or where his position is essentially neutral, his opinions are subject to question. Donald Greene has noted this qualification and, in speaking of the Dictionary as an authoritative source for the political opinions of the lexicographer, he refers to the "large extent" to which the latter "was merely following accepted lexicographical tradition. Even some of the examples cited by Boswell as most clearly expressing Johnson's own prejudices are arguable."<sup>26</sup>

However, what concerns this thesis is not prejudices but moral philosophy, and in the area of morality there is no ambiguity in Johnson's position. "We are perpetually moralists" he has said, and his personal commitment to this attitude is borne out by evidence of the Dictionary. He indirectly promotes virtue in the work by exercising a form of moral censorship which avoids illustrative citations from authors whose views he considers inimical to morality. For

---

<sup>25</sup>Wimsatt, Philosophic Words (New Haven, 1948), p. x.

<sup>26</sup>The Politics of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 154.

example, Thomas Hobbes is never mentioned because he bears the stigma of imputed irreligion; hence, he is debarred, even though Johnson shared many of the views of the "Atheist of Malmesbury," including views of such basic philosophic importance as the concept of the nature of man as being essentially wolfish. Similar is the case of Samuel Clarke, a clergyman whose sermons and other writings Johnson held in high esteem. He is mentioned frequently in Boswell's Life, yet is never cited in the Dictionary because of a certain unorthodoxy in his views regarding the Trinity.<sup>27</sup> A rather surprising instance of comparative neglect is the case of Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, "the only book that ever took him (Johnson) out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise."<sup>28</sup> The work made a profound impression upon Johnson, and Burton's aphoristic style made him eminently suitable for quotation, yet his name appears but rarely in the Dictionary. One can only surmise that the rather sombre subject matter of the Anatomy was held by Johnson to be inappropriate for natures less ruggedly constituted than his own.

All of these examples attest to Johnson's abiding concern for the moral well-being of his reader; they also confirm the

---

<sup>27</sup>E. L. McAdam, Jr., Donald and Mary Hyde, eds., Diaries, Prayers and Annals, by Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press), I (1958), 105n.

<sup>28</sup>James Boswell, Life of Johnson, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), II, 121.



adherence to his own famous dictum: "It is always the writer's duty to make the world better."<sup>29</sup> Although there would appear to be little scope in a work of lexicography for such a laudable purpose, Johnson, by exercising the negative virtue of exclusion, with the one hand wards off possible baneful influences; with the other hand he thrusts forward those beneficent and positive influences which he taps by a discriminating use of illustrative quotation.

Granting that a system of moral order prevails throughout the Dictionary, who are the authors whose cited words bear by implication the Johnsonian stamp of moral approval? A statistical study of the first volume of the four volume edition of the Dictionary has provided a valid answer to this question through a complete tabulation of sources, a tabulation which reveals that the four authors most frequently cited by Johnson are: Shakespeare, Dryden, Milton, and Bacon, in that order of frequency.<sup>30</sup> This choice illustrates Johnson's rare ability to transcend the barriers of prejudice and to view objectively, and to appreciate fairly, the work of others whose order of literary and moral values differ from his own. J. W. Krutch has commented upon this liberality of attitude:

---

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare: Works, VII, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis M. Freed, "The Sources of Johnson's Dictionary" (diss., Cornell University,, 1939).

One of the most striking features of Johnson as a moralist is his unusual combination of unyielding strictness so far as what he regarded as positively required or positively forbidden to man is concerned, with the greatest indulgence for himself as well as for others in the matter of all activities which he regarded as essentially neutral. He distrusted, as he clearly said, all tendency to multiply scruples.<sup>31</sup>

This liberality of attitude was atypical in an age where absolutism in moral standards was the general rule. Also atypical was the imaginative leap of his understanding which allowed him to enter into the spirit of a previous age and to project his wide sympathy to encompass the human and social virtues, as well as the failings of the literary representatives of that age. The underlying tolerance of Johnson tends to be obscured by the surface appearance of hide-bound toryism which he too often presented to the world. It is a tolerance which is operative in his selection of the four great literary figures who are his primary sources for citations; for each of these figures fall afoul of Johnsonian principles in one way or another.

In the case of Shakespeare there is an inherent contradiction between Johnson's respect for classical principles of order and the regularity and his partiality to the highly irregular bard. We see him wrestling with this ambivalence as he speaks in the Preface to Shakespeare of his subject's

---

<sup>31</sup>Samuel Johnson (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1945), p. 315.

"defects" in the sphere of morality:

He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil; nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked . . . This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place.<sup>32</sup>

The note of censure apparent in these words is relatively mild when measured against the general tone of approbation throughout the Preface. The key to Johnson's self-justification for his favouritism is contained in the statement: "he that thinks reasonably must think morally"; in other words, Shakespeare's intention may not have been moral, but the effect of his work tends to the advancement of morality and therefore merits commendation.

Any Johnsonian commendation could be expected to come more grudgingly in an assessment of the life and works of John Milton. The monarchist and orthodox Johnson shared little common ground, either in political convictions or in religious tenets, with the man he referred to as a "surly republican." Notwithstanding, the honest critic in Johnson gives due recognition to the literary genius of Milton; the vigilant moralist in him voices due praise for the Miltonic

---

<sup>32</sup>Works, VII (New Haven, 1968), p. 71.

moralism: "Of his moral sentiments it is hardly praise to affirm that they excel that of all other poets; for this superiority he was indebted to his acquaintance with the sacred writings."<sup>33</sup>

For John Dryden, in religion and in politics a turncoat and in moralism a lightweight by any criterion, Johnson can find a solid basis for appreciation only in the province of literary achievement. His highest praise is reserved for Dryden's contribution to English poetry, and in his summation of that contribution he eulogizes the poet in these words: "What was said of Rome, adorned by Augustus, may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden, 'he found it brick, and he left it marble.'"<sup>34</sup>

I have drawn out this discussion of these three authors to some length, in order to illustrate an important aspect of Johnson as a moralist, namely: his broad-minded toleration of the differing religious and political views of others and, in addition, his implicit acceptance of the fact that the moral attitude of others may be keyed to a different pitch and applied less rigorously than his own. Another, and converse aspect, is the latent dogmatism and stubborn inflexibility of his character, an aspect which invariably surfaces whenever he divines a threat to his own tenaciously held convictions

---

<sup>33</sup>"Life of Milton," Lives, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, I, 179.

<sup>34</sup>"Life of Dryden," Lives, I, 469.

regarding the immutable verities of revealed religion and morality. Johnson was a realist with a pessimistic streak; he did not expect perfection in this world; and, though his moral aim is to inculcate virtue, he never underestimates the difficulty of his task. Perhaps nothing reveals so well the bond of worldly wisdom which links him to Bacon as does his approving comment upon the latter's realistic views: "Bacon in the History of the Winds, after having offered something to the imagination as desirable, often proposes lower advantages in its place to the reason as attainable."<sup>35</sup>

This is only one of many instances of the community of interests and of feeling Johnson shared with Bacon. It is a bond of sympathy reinforced by the empathy and the tolerance I have previously cited; all of which, in total, more than compensate for the disapproval Johnson expressed for Bacon's lapse in moral rectitude. James Boswell, writing of Johnson in the Life, reveals something of his subject's attitude regarding Bacon:

He told me, that Bacon was a favourite author with him, but he had never read his works till he was compiling the English Dictionary, in which he said, I might see Bacon very often quoted. Mr. Seward recollects his having mentioned, that a Dictionary of the English Language might be compiled from Bacon's writings alone, and that he had once an intention of giving an edition of Bacon, at least of his English works, and writing the Life of that great man.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Rambler 14; Works III, 77-78.

<sup>36</sup> ed. G. B. Hill, III, 194.

I have stressed the pervasive influence of Johnson's moral censorship implicit in his selection of citations for the Dictionary, a selectivity which confirms an adherence to his own dictum: "We are perpetually moralists." However, in this instance, Johnson is not only a moralist but also a lexicographer engaged in a task requiring monumental effort and involving monumental tedium and drudgery. It is the sheer magnitude of the mechanics of this task which compels Johnson to lower his sights as he faces the practical impossibility of maintaining the meticulous standards he had established for himself and had endeavored to maintain under the letter "A."<sup>37</sup> Confined by the relentless pressures of time and by the limitations of endurance, Johnson, as a practical man and as a conscientious lexicographer, must have found his volumes of Bacon as something in the nature of a godsend. Here, at his hand, was profound knowledge condensed into aphoristic phrases, phrases which, in their axiomatic terseness, were ideally fitted to his purpose as a lexicographer; in their content congenial to his moral philosophy; in their aphoristic form attuned to the literary taste of one who was not only himself a great aphorist but who also esteemed highly the aphoristic skill of others, as his words bear witness:

He may therefore be justly numbered among the benefactors of mankind, who contracts the great rules of life into short

---

<sup>37</sup>See Wimsatt, Philosophic Words, p. 46.

sentences, that may be easily impressed on the memory, and taught by frequent recollection to recur habitually to the mind.<sup>38</sup>

In respect to aphoristic skill, the figure of Francis Bacon looms large among such "benefactors of mankind," and the extent to which his works were in the nature of a godsend to the harried lexicographer is revealed by the testimony of the Dictionary; for it is a matter of important statistical fact that in the first volume alone, comprising approximately a fourth of the total words, Johnson has drawn upon Francis Bacon as a source for nearly twenty-five hundred illustrative citations.<sup>39</sup>

This emphasis upon the important practical benefits which such citations conferred upon the lexicographer, must not obscure the fact that they are intended also to serve a larger aim in the advancement of man's moral interests. This is made patent in the Preface, wherein Johnson announces his intention that all the citations shall be "useful to some other end than the illustration of a word." It is to further this moral purpose that he turns to the works of the Elizabethan authors where, among "the wells of English undefiled," he finds the sources of a speech "adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance." Among these masters Johnson cites Francis Bacon as

---

<sup>38</sup>Rambler 175; Works V, 160.

<sup>39</sup>Freed, "The Sources of Johnson's Dictionary," p. 47.

his sufficient authority for the terms of "natural knowledge." He does, indeed, draw largely upon Bacon's Natural History to illustrate the terms of natural philosophy, but his interests have a wider scope, and he ranges widely among Bacon's works to find many quotations which he applies to the illustration of the terms of moral philosophy.

One example of these latter illustrative quotations occurs in his definition of the word "rationalist," a term highly significant within the context of moral philosophy. In the Dictionary Johnson gives the denotative meaning of the term as : "one who proceeds in his disquisitions and practice wholly upon reason." He then proceeds to elaborate upon his definition, and to reveal the personal connotations he attaches to the term, by calling upon a series of apt similes drawn from Bacon's works.

He often used this comparison, the empirical philosophers are like to pismires; they only lay up and use their store; the rationalists are like to spiders; they spin all out of their bowels; but give me the philosopher, who, like the bee, hath a middle faculty, gathering from abroad, but digesting what is gathered by his own virtue.

Johnson's use of this illustration indicates his link with the moral thought of Bacon in this important area; it further indicates that he shares Bacon's reservations regarding any too-exclusive a dependence upon the rational faculty. This latter fact is confirmed by the testimony of his work, with its Baconian emphasis upon the observation and the



experience of life as being necessarily antecedent to the exercise of right reason. Like Swift's famous bee in The Battle of the Books, he would hold that the mind must first enrich itself "by an universal Range, with long Search, much Study, true Judgment, and Distinction of Things,"<sup>40</sup> for not until then may it reap the full harvest of its labours.

J. H. Hagstrum has remarked on this important qualification of Johnson's rationalism:

Bacon's little fable of the bee leaves room for the rational faculty, since the mind must, by its own power, digest at home the materials presented to it. But before everything else it must gather from abroad through empirical observation and search.

Johnson not only accepted the Baconian conception of the mind-empirical observation followed by rationalistic "digestion"--as an epistemological truth, but he made it fundamental to his conception of the mental preparation of the poet for his task. One of the most striking facts about Johnson's oft-repeated "character" of the poet is the prominence he gives to the empirical faculty.<sup>41</sup>

Poetry, for Francis Bacon, is a plant sprung "from the lust of the earth without a formal seed" and, whereas philosophy has reference to the faculty of Reason, poetry pertains to Imagination, which "may at pleasure make unlawful matches and divorces of things."<sup>42</sup> Both of these faculties of the

---

<sup>40</sup> A Tale of a Tub and The Battle of the Books, eds. A. C. Guthkelch, D. Nichol Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 232.

<sup>41</sup> "Nature of Dr. Johnson's Rationalism," JELH, XVIII (1950), 195.

<sup>42</sup> Bacon, Works, IV, 315.

rational soul must be informed by the observation and by the experience of life and, although both serve a complementary function, the role of Imagination is subservient, and it must not presume to domination over Reason. Nevertheless, in respect to certain creative functions of the Imagination, Bacon does admit a qualification to this role of subservience:

For sense sendeth over to Imagination before Reason have judged . . . Neither is the Imagination simply and only a messenger; but is invested with or at least usurpeth no small authority in itself . . . for we see in matters of Faith and Religion we raise our Imagination above our Reason.<sup>43</sup>

Bacon, somewhat patronizingly, refers to poetry in general as the "pleasure and play of imagination." However, for heroic poetry he finds words of praise, for it "conduces not only to delight but also to magnanimity and morality" and "partakes somewhat of a divine nature, because it raises the mind and carries it aloft, accomodating the show of things to the desires of the mind."<sup>44</sup> He recognizes the potential value of poetry as a medium of moral instruction but, apart from this, his praise is in the nature of "an indulgent concession to human frailty, to the Idols of the Tribe."<sup>45</sup> Poetry is a subject at the opposite pole to the science which is his

---

<sup>43</sup>Bacon, Works, III, 382.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., IV, 316.

<sup>45</sup>Basil Willey, The English Moralists (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 146.

paramount interest; hence, it is obviously of secondary importance to him. Nothing could be more indicative of his attitude toward poetry than the tone of perfunctory dismissal which pervades the paragraph which abruptly closes his treatment of the subject: "But we stay too long in the theatre; let us now pass to the palace of the mind, which we are to approach and enter with more reverence and attention."<sup>46</sup>

The "palace of the mind" meant as much to Johnson as it did to Bacon, and the conjunction in their thought regarding the vital role of empirical observation in the realm of reason is repeated in their like insistence upon empirical knowledge as being the essential basis for the proper functioning of the imaginative faculty. "Imagination," Johnson declares, "is useless without knowledge: nature gives in vain the power of combination, unless study and observation supply materials to be combined."<sup>47</sup> Thus, in effect, he denies that imagination can be the fountainhead of any form of transcendental knowledge. In common with the general practise of his age, Johnson treats "fancy" and "imagination" as synonymous terms, as is evident in the Dictionary where he defines the latter term as: "Fancy: the power of forming ideal pictures; the power of representing things absent to

---

<sup>46</sup>Bacon, Works, IV, 335.

<sup>47</sup>"Life of Butler," Lives, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, I, 212.

one's self or others." What is significant to my purpose is that, as in the case of the term, "rationalist," Johnson has elected to illustrate the possible connotative interpretations of the term by an extensive quotation from the works of Bacon. On this occasion, however, he has the additional advantage of being able to record Bacon's own considered attempt to define all that he himself comprehended by the term "imagination":

Imagination I understand to be the representation of an individual thought. Imagination is of three kinds: joined with belief of that which is to come; joined with memory of that which is past; and of things present, or as if they were present; for I comprehend in this imagination feigned and at pleasure, as if one should imagine such a man to be in the vestments of a pope, or to have wings.

Johnson's implicit endorsement of the Baconian interpretations can be inferred from his use of the citation; but his own more subjective definition, and one which reveals what is perhaps a certain impatience with the inherent ambiguity of the term, appears in Rambler 125:

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations and impatient of restraint, has always endeavored to baffle the logician, to perplex the confines of distinction, and burst the enclosures of regularity.<sup>48</sup>

Johnson's view of the imagination assumes a darker cast than does that of Bacon. His bitter struggles with his own unruly inclinations and passions doubtless gave him a keener awareness of the power of the irrational forces of imagination

---

<sup>48</sup>Works IV, 300.

to subvert the dominance of reason, an awareness which comes through in the ring of conviction in his statements on the subject. Nevertheless, he would not hold it possible or even desirable for man to achieve the opposite position of a cold, dispassionate rationality; to do so would be to suppress the vital passional side of his nature and to deny the incapable fact that humanity is compounded of both reason and passion. Man, placed on the "isthmus of a middle state," is neither houghnhnm nor yahoo; his human nature forces him to walk an endless tightrope; reason and passion ride on either end of his balancing rod; whether that rod inclines too far to one side or the other, it is alike disaster.

In Rasselas, Johnson's ironic satire probes the effects of such imbalance in the human mind: the stoic philosopher, who breaks down under the weight of unexpected personal affliction, reveals the fallacy of the claim of human self-sufficiency based exclusively upon the rational faculty; on the other hand, the mad astronomer illustrates the dangers of creating an imaginary world of illusion by the single-minded concentration upon particulars, for this self-created world can, all too easily, become a world of delusion.

It is this tendency of imagination to concentrate upon what is transitory and particular, rather than upon what is permanent and universal, which is at the root of Johnson's distrust of this "vagrant" faculty. His awareness of this tendency within his own turbulent nature, and his constant

efforts to control it, perhaps gave a compensatory colouring to his attitude regarding imaginative literature in general. Certainly, from a modern perspective, his general approach to poetry and his conception of the poet's role appear as pedestrian as do the comparable attitudes of Bacon. There is the same stress on the didactive function of poetry: "the end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing";<sup>49</sup> also, there is the same praise for epic poetry: "which undertakes to teach the most important truths by the most pleasing precepts."<sup>50</sup> Finally, there is the typically Baconian emphasis upon empirical knowledge; for Johnson holds that the mark of the genuine poet is truth to nature, and such truth can only be derived from antecedent experience.

The oft-quoted passage from Rasselas,<sup>51</sup> in which Imlac claims the business of the poet is not to number the streaks of the tulip, has often been interpreted as a definitive statement of Johnson's own aesthetic principles. This is not necessarily so. Much of what Imlac says in his dissertation on poetry is indeed consistent with Johnson's critical tenets, but Imlac is carried so far afield by his transports of enthusiasm as to lose his customary common sense, until he "sounds like any of the other impractical visionaries in the

---

<sup>49</sup>Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare; Works, VII, 67.

<sup>50</sup>"Life of Milton," Lives, ed. G. B. Hill, I, 170.

<sup>51</sup>Chap. x.

story in announcing the requisites of poetry--universal knowledge and complete objectivity."<sup>52</sup> The tenor of the dissertation confirms the fact that at some indefinite point parody has taken over, and the view of poetry represented by Imlac has become the target of Johnsonian irony and humour. "Bardolatry," it has been aptly said, "certainly is not a sin Johnson ever committed,"<sup>53</sup> and his own somewhat modest claims for poetry are completely at variance with the grandiloquent claims of Imlac. Johnson's own commentary on these latter claims appears in the decisive words of Rasselas which properly deflate Imlac: "Enough! thou hast convinced me that no human being can ever be a poet!"<sup>54</sup>

To return once again to Francis Bacon, there is an important statement in the De Augmentis concerning the psychological faculties which form the primary supports of the system of knowledge and of learning which he is propounding:

The best division of human learning is that derived from the three faculties of the rational soul, which is the seat of learning. History has reference to the Memory, poesy to the Imagination, and philosophy to the Reason . . . . Wherefore from these three fountains, Memory, Imagination, and Reason flow these three emanations, History, Poesy, and Philosophy: and there can be no others.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Alvin Whitley, "The Comedy of Rasselas," ELH, XXIII (March, 1956), 57.

<sup>53</sup> Clarence R. Tracy, "Democritus Arise!, A Study of Dr. Johnson's Humor," Yale Review, XXXIX (1949), 307.

<sup>54</sup> Rasselas, chap. xi.

<sup>55</sup> II. I: Works, IV, 292.

The phrase, "the best division," is highly suggestive in the context of this Baconian classification of learning for, as one writer has noted, it "implies an awareness of different ways of classification and deliberate choice of his own basis."<sup>56</sup> In this choice Bacon has rejected the classical account of the faculties, with its inclusion of a faculty of common sense; he has also rejected the account of the schoolmen, with its multiplicity of divisions created by abstract speculation. His own division, simple and concrete, reflects his constant preference for the functional rather than the speculative. It was designed to form the basis of a practical classification of learning which would not only encompass all that had already been discovered on the map of knowledge, but would also signalize those shadowy areas which it was most needful for man to explore. In the creation of this system of knowledge the three basic categories of Reason, Memory, and Imagination are crucially important to Bacon, for these three faculties form the structural centre of his building of learning and carry most of the weight of this building, together with all of its elaborations and all of its ramifications.

In respect to these three faculties, the evidence of the Dictionary reveals how Johnson has followed the Baconian conception of the function of both Reason and of Imagination.

---

<sup>56</sup> Anderson, The Philosophy of Francis Bacon, p. 156.



What of Memory, the third faculty, and the one to which Bacon assigns the field of History? The attitude of Bacon regarding this faculty has been aptly described as follows:

The senses, imagination, reason, and understanding fed memory and memory fed them. The rational faculties and affective powers as channels of knowing, feeling, action, and movement were not only inoperable but inconceivable without memory, the storehouse of experience.<sup>57</sup>

To find the most complete expression of Johnson's attitude concerning memory, it is necessary to move outside of the Dictionary to Idler 44, wherein he voices his thoughts on the three faculties of Bacon's classification,<sup>58</sup> with a particular emphasis upon the offices of the faculty of memory:

Memory is, among the faculties of the human mind, that of which we make the most frequent use, or rather that of which the agency is incessant or perpetual. Memory is the primary and fundamental power, without which there could be no other intellectual operation. Judgment and ratiocination suppose something already known, and draw their decisions only from experience. Imagination selects ideas from the treasures of remembrance, and produces novelty only by varied combinations. We do not even form conjectures of distant, or anticipation of future events, but by concluding what is possible from what is past.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup>Anderson, p. 156.

<sup>58</sup>See Robert Shackleton, "Johnson and the Enlightenment," in Johnson, Boswell and their Circle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 90. This author has noted the connection with Bacon's classification and also finds Johnson's thoughts "reminiscent of the system of classification of human knowledge, based on these three faculties, which D'Alembert, following Bacon's example, had effected in the 'Discours Préliminaire' to the Encyclopédie."

<sup>59</sup>Works, II (New Haven, 1963), p. 137.

Falling within the province of this faculty of memory are, according to Bacon, all of the several branches of history, a field of study "properly concerned with individuals, which are circumscribed by place and time." Civil history, which includes biography, is one of these branches, a branch, moreover, which Bacon esteems so highly that he declares the difficulty of it to be "no less than the dignity . . . and the dignity and authority are pre-eminent among human writings."<sup>60</sup> It was in the time of his disgrace that Bacon himself turned to this area, perhaps as a means of consolation, and published in 1622 the History of Henry VII. Although later ages were to unearth new evidence which was to supplant this work as a factual history, it nevertheless remains a classic example of Bacon's narrative skill; and, what is more important, it marks a breaking of new ground in English biography in the honest and objective characterization of Henry. "I have not flattered him," says Bacon, simply and truthfully, in his Dedication of the work, "but took him to life as well as I could, sitting so far off, and having no better light."<sup>61</sup>

A century and a half later, Samuel Johnson was also to turn in the evening of his years to this area of writing and to produce his greatest work of biography in The Lives of the Poets. "If a man is to write 'A Panegyric,'" he was to say,

---

<sup>60</sup>De Augmentis II. V; Works, IV, 302.

<sup>61</sup>Works, VI, 25.

"he may keep vices out of sight; but he professes to write 'A Life,' he must represent it as it really was."<sup>62</sup> In the period of Johnson, as in that of Bacon, lofty panegyric all too often passed for biography; however, following the Baconian example, and running completely counter to this accepted practise, Johnson became the first biographer of his century to insist upon the purveyance of truth as being the primary duty of the biographer. He was the first to hold that such biographic truth was more important than respect for a dead man; he was the first to emphasize the personal rather than the public aspect of his subject.

This emphasis upon the personal is keyed to Johnson's never-failing concern for the reader's moral edification. By depicting the vices and weaknesses, as well as the virtues of his subjects, he illustrates the moral lessons which can be drawn from the vicissitudes of their lives. There is no doubt that Johnson approached biography as a labour of love; this is evidenced by the amplification of the Lives under his hand far beyond their planned scope. "No species of writing," he claims, "seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition."<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup>Boswell, Life, III, 155.

<sup>63</sup>Rambler 60; Works, III, 319.

Biography then, combines both delight and instruction to produce knowledge useful and needful for man's estate in this world, rather than mere knowledge for its own sake.

In this investigation of Johnson's Dictionary it has only been necessary to delve below surface appearances to strike the firm foundation of the author's consistent moral purpose. Within the constrictive framework imposed by lexicography, a system of moral order has prevailed; the morally deleterious has been censored and expurgated; only that which bears the stamp of Johnsonian moral approval has been retained. As a result, every citation has Johnson's implicit moral endorsement, and is a valid gauge of his moral attitude.

The frequency of the citations drawn from Bacon's works indicates how heavily Johnson has leaned upon the concise wisdom of the earlier master, not only because the brevity of form of these citations made them eminently suitable for quotation, but also because the views they express were those to which he himself fully subscribed. I have shown how, in his definition of terms essential to moral philosophy, terms such as: "Imagination" and "Rationalism," Johnson follows Bacon in stressing the vital role of empirical observation and experience in informing these faculties, and follows him also in stressing the need for a check rein to control the vagrant faculty of imagination. A third faculty, that of memory, is held by both philosophers to be vitally important. Bacon sees it as pertaining to history and hence to biography, a

field "pre-eminent among human writings." In this field Bacon was a pioneer, as was Johnson, and a common factor in their biographic work is the honest objectivity with which they approached their subject.

This correspondence of opinion regarding the role of reason, imagination, and memory extends, in Johnson's case, to his acceptance of the structural division of the Baconian theory of knowledge which is based upon these faculties. In following this division, which marks an important break with traditional thought, Johnson reveals how closely he is linked to Baconian principles in what are essential issues of moral philosophy.

From among the many thousands of citations from Bacon scattered throughout the Dictionary, I have discussed only a few important philosophical terms; a wealth of further information could be called upon to illustrate other areas of Johnson's interest. For example: it is most significant that the lexicographer should draw frequently upon the works of Bacon for his definitions of legal terms. Johnson had a profound interest in the law, as is evident in a reading of Boswell's Life, and more than once he had seriously considered studying for the legal profession. Not only had he dictated briefs to that struggling young lawyer, James Boswell, but he had also collaborated with Robert Chambers in composing certain Oxford lectures on English

Law.<sup>64</sup> A strong interest in the study of law presupposes a distinctive quality of mind, and here, as in so many other areas, Johnson is again linked to that great master of English jurisprudence, Francis Bacon.

In the course of this chapter I have traced the fundamental agreement of the two moralists regarding the faculties of the mind and the foundations of knowledge. In examining the moral essays of both men it will be possible to see how this agreement in principle has been applied in practise in the performance of what Bacon calls the "duty" of humanity: "to put the wanderer on the right way."

---

<sup>64</sup>See Edward Lipincott McAdam Jr., Dr. Johnson and the English Law (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1951).

## CHAPTER V

### THE MORAL ESSAYS

When Francis Bacon, the philosopher who took all knowledge as his province, began his monumental survey of knowledge with The Advancement of Learning, the vast scope of his undertaking and the pressures of a busy life forced the need to discriminate between fields well covered by others and those which suffered from a comparative neglect. The former he treats rather superficially; the latter receives the major concentration. This is entirely consonant with his intention of ensuring that deficiencies in knowledge are supplied; it is an intention which must be borne in mind, for it is the key to what often appears to be a disparate treatment of subjects which may be of equal intrinsic importance. Nevertheless, even where such deficiencies do exist, he frequently has to be content with an outline of the problem, together with a brief presentation of his views and his suggestions for a solution, providing, in effect, guideposts for others to follow.

It is in relation to such problems that there are strong grounds for believing that certain of Bacon's Essays serve a complementary function to The Advancement in attempting to supply some of the deficiencies which the author had noted in the latter work. One modern authority has cited the many parallels which support this contention, and has gone on to state:

. . . one of Bacon's primary motives in composing a majority of pieces contained in his second and third collections was a desire to supply some of the deficiencies in morality and policy of which he had become aware while engaged in the "general and faithful perambulation of learning" which constituted the first stage in his great philosophical undertaking.<sup>65</sup>

In respect to this complementary correlation, the Essays of Bacon provide what is often a more fully considered and a more ample treatment of the moral issues raised in The Advancement; consequently, they stand in the same relationship to the latter work as the periodical essays of Johnson stand to the Johnsonian canon and invite a valid comparison. However, before drawing such a comparison, it will be necessary to determine the fundamental purpose of the Baconian Essays and also their particular qualities.

I have stated previously that Bacon avoided, wherever possible, any involvement in theological or metaphysical speculation; as a consequence, he freed himself to "look into and dissect the nature of the real world," and to probe the knowledge which comes from nature and from man. From these sources comes knowledge which may be either theoretical or functional; the one is applicable to speculative purposes, the other, to practical. Bacon frankly admits his predilection for the knowledge which is for use rather than for

---

<sup>65</sup>R. S. Crane, "The Relation of Bacon's Essays to his Program for the Advancement of Learning," Essential Articles for the Study of Francis Bacon, ed. Brian Vickers (Hamdsen, Connecticut: Acton Books, 1968), p. 278.



speculation, and this leaning is clearly manifested in the Essays. Believing that this mission in life was to serve his fellow man, Bacon based his conception of this service upon his seasoned insight into the nature of man as he found him, and not upon what man professed himself to be. He saw clearly the disparity between what man does and what he ought to do; he saw in others, and he recognized in himself, the driving need for worldly success. This compulsive need, common to every age, was notably strong in his own period, so much so that "to Bacon and to others, particularly Machiavelli, the successful conduct of life became the subject of a philosophy."<sup>66</sup> To the extent that the Essays convey prudent counsel concerning the seizing of occasions and opportunities to the end of getting on in life, they can be said to conform to this new "philosophy." Is this Machiavellianism? Not necessarily, it merely indicates that Bacon, along with Machiavelli, "shared a trait that was part and parcel of the age."<sup>67</sup> This quality of the Essays illustrates practical moral philosophy applied to the end of improving man's lot in this world; it also exemplifies concretely the role which Bacon advocates in The Advancement for the would-be moral mentor, namely: that he apply a wide knowledge of the world to "ordinary or common

---

<sup>66</sup>Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass: The Elizabethan Mind in Literature (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950), p. 141.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

matters."

This orientation of the Essays towards what is materially beneficent to man, has laid Bacon open to the charge that he has ignored or minimized the important emotive and spiritual aspects of man's nature. It is a charge which does have some validity, but Bacon should not be judged on the basis of what he has omitted but, rather, on what he has included, and this in itself marks a valuable contribution to practical moral philosophy. The same pressures which, in The Advancement, cause Bacon to scant areas of moral philosophy well covered by others, pressures which never permit him to fully conclude a work, are also operative in the Essays, and they dictate a choice of topics of "which there is frequent occasion to handle," topics which "come home to men's business and bosoms."<sup>68</sup> Neither does Bacon forget the world of the ideal in his concern for the practical. In the Essays, as in The Advancement, the moralist in Bacon is concerned to bring the will of man to the "Goodness" which "answers to the theological virtue Charity, and admits no excess but error."<sup>69</sup> He holds that man can be brought to the practice of virtue by instilling in him such knowledge as in "medicinable." This knowledge, however, must be seasoned by the "corrective spice"

---

<sup>68</sup>The Epistle Dedicatory, Essays, 1625 ed.; Works, VII, 373.

<sup>69</sup>"Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature," Essays; Works, VII, 403.

of charity, otherwise if it be "severed from charity and not referred to the good of men and mankind, it hath rather a sounding and unworthy glory than a meriting and substantial virtue."<sup>70</sup>

Holding such views, how does one proceed in the "bending" of the will of man to virtue? Bacon's answer is to adopt the very means he had recommended in The Advancement. Having cognizance of the mind's inherent limitations and its "natural hatred of necessity and constraint," he utilizes a flexible approach and, employing indirection where necessary, skillfully adapts his means to the desired end of achieving reformation.

For the efficient conveyance of knowledge, Bacon maintained there are two methods: the Magistral and Initiative. The magistral teaches that which should be believed; the initiative intimates what should be examined. Bacon advocates the latter method, with the use of apothegms and aphorisms to render the knowledge concisely, and antitheses used in conjunction to challenge the judgment. It is a method to which Bacon attaches great importance, and it is largely the method of the Essays. The brusque succinctness of the aphorisms in these studies is deliberately provocative and stimulates interest while it invites examination; the antitheses

---

<sup>70</sup>The Advancement of Learning, I; Works, III, 266.

are fully investigated and are balanced to present both sides fairly; authorial judgment is suspended to force the reader to exercise his intellect in the process of evaluation. Antitheses reveal objective truth, initiate thought, and free the mind from subjection to idols. Their frequent occurrence throughout the Essays illustrates what can be called a juridical approach. It is an approach which came naturally to Bacon, whose legal training endowed him with the ability to act dispassionately in the role of either prosecutor or defender. In neither case, it must be remembered, is Bacon necessarily representing his own views; he is merely enacting roles and, by the withholding of personal judgment, he is impelling the reader to assume the responsibility of both judge and member of the jury in drawing conclusions on important issues. A failure to grasp this basic intention has led many--and notably William Blake--to presume that Bacon is speaking in the Essays as the Devil's advocate and rendering "good advice for Satan's kingdom." Samuel Johnson, as religious as was Blake, if more orthodox in his piety, voiced an appreciation of the Essays which reveals a greater clarity of perception: "Their excellence and their value consisted in being the observations of a strong mind operating upon life; and in consequence you find there what you seldom find in other books."<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup>Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), II, 229.

The use of antitheses, as well as that of apothegms and aphorisms, comprise only one aspect of a masterly technique of language which Bacon has designed for the purpose of guiding the reader, through a process of indirection, "to a sober enquiry of truth." By abstaining from theorizing, speculation, or personal committal on the issues he raises, Bacon avoids any tendency to influence by "necessity and constraint"; instead, he unobtrusively guides the reader's mind to the exercise of its rational faculty and, consequently, into the path of right reason. The path of right reason is the path of virtue for, to Bacon as to Johnson, the terms were virtually synonymous; indeed, it was Johnson himself who said: "He who thinks reasonably must think morally."<sup>72</sup> It is a measure of Bacon's artistic skill that he could accomplish his didactic purpose with such deftness that the medium and the message alike were agreeable to his contemporaries and he could justly claim his Essays to be the most "current" of his works.

The genius of Francis Bacon imparted an air of individuality and a sense of grandeur to every subject he touched: just as the depth of insight and the mastery of form he exhibited in the History of Henry VII fully entitle him to be called the first important English historian, so do these same qualities contribute to the unique worth of the Baconian

---

<sup>72</sup>Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare; Works, VII (New Haven, 1968), p. 71.

Essays and fully warrant their author to be the first important English essayist.

In examining these essays, it has been my purpose to show that they are not merely incidental efforts; they form an important and integral part of the structure of knowledge concerning the human state which Bacon is erecting; they are a buttress to his programme "for the practical examination of the causes of human conduct, and he profits from his knowledge of Machiavelli on man conjugate and of Montaigne on man segregate."<sup>73</sup> From the study of the causes of human conduct, Bacon proceeds by corollary to the study of effects; the result is a compendium of practical advice on how man may prosper in the material world in which God has placed him.

As I have suggested previously, Bacon's obeisance to the all-powerful Church of his day may have been dictated more by policy than by conviction; nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his belief in the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, particularly so in regard to the primary dictate which enjoins the practise of Christian love and charity. It is this sense of Christian obligation towards his fellow man which motivates Bacon to undertake the role of essayist; it is his natural bias towards the practical which, seconded by the urgencies of time, determines that his

---

<sup>73</sup>F. P. Wilson, Elizabethan and Jacobean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 24.

subjects be such as "come home to men's business and bosoms."<sup>74</sup> In developing these subjects he adheres closely to the principles governing moral suasion which he has enunciated in The Advancement, principles which depend upon the operative agency of language to "bend" the mind to virtue by bringing right reason to bear upon an increased fund of knowledge.

These, briefly, are the methods and the underlying intentions of the Essays of Bacon. It now remains to ascertain whether there is a correlation in these aspects in the periodical essays of Samuel Johnson.

The "Great Cham" of eighteenth-century literature was a sometime poet, critic, lexicographer, and essayist; he was consistently a moralist; the wide scope of this latter interest embraces all of his work, but the periodical essays bear the sharpest focus of its concentration. The expressed intention of the essayist in The Rambler is "to consider the moral discipline of the mind and to promote the increase of virtue rather than of learning,"<sup>76</sup> by precepts intended "chiefly for those who are endeavoring to go forward up the steeps of virtue."<sup>76</sup> these sentiments echo the implicit intention of the Baconian Essays; both moralists are following the spirit of the precepts of The Advancement and are presenting their moral

---

<sup>74</sup>The Epistle Dedicatory, Essays, 1625 ed.; Works, VII, 373.

<sup>75</sup>Rambler 8 Works, III, 42.

<sup>76</sup>Rambler 70; Works, IV, 4.

philosophy as a "humble handmaid" to the service of "sacred divinity." Samuel Johnson, in the closing paragraph of his final Rambler, gives a rather moving summary of his purpose in these essays:

The essays professedly, if I have been able to execute my own intentions, will be found exactly conformable to the precepts of Christianity, without any accomodation to the licentiousness and levity of the present age. I therefore look back on this part of my work with pleasure, which no blame or praise of man shall diminish or augment. I shall never envy the honours which wit and learning obtain in any other cause, if I can be numbered among the writers who have given ardour to virtue and confidence to truth.<sup>77</sup>

Francis Bacon, looking back from a similar vantage point at the concluded essays of his 1597 edition, finds in them nothing "contrary or infectious to the state of Religion, or manners, but rather (as I suppose) medicinal."<sup>78</sup>

This correspondence in opinion relative to the moral worth of their respective essays, extends also to the value which they expect posterity to place upon them. Bacon boldly opines that the Latin version of his Essays "may last as long as books last";<sup>79</sup> Johnson has similar expectations for the Rambler, and in his words concerning these essays there is a rare burst of complacency: "My other works are wine and

---

<sup>77</sup>Works, V, 320.

<sup>78</sup>The Epistle Dedicatory, Essays, 1597 ed.; Works, VII, 523.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 1625 ed.; Works, VII, 373.



water; but my Rambler is pure wine."<sup>80</sup> "It is the fate of controvertists," Johnson says in Rambler 106, "even when they contend for philosophical or theological truth, to be soon laid aside and slighted."<sup>81</sup> A contrary fate awaits the true moralist, for the latter, with his deep insight into what is general in human nature, may rationally expect his works to live after his death. Johnson's own high opinion of the value of Bacon's Essays leads him to comment upon the latter's pretensions to the regard of posterity:

There are, indeed few kinds of composition from which an author, however learned or ingenious, can hope a long continuance of fame. He who has carefully studied human nature, and can well describe it, may with most reason flatter his ambition. Bacon, among all his pretensions to the regard of posterity seems to have pleased himself chiefly with his Essays, "which come home to men's business and bosoms," and of which, therefore, he declares his expectation, that they "will live as long as books last."

Typically, Johnson adds a moral tag:

It may however, satisfy an honest and benevolent mind to have been useful, though less conspicuous; nor will he that extends his hopes to higher rewards be so much anxious to obtain praise, as to discharge the duty which Providence assigns him."<sup>82</sup>

"Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up":<sup>83</sup> these words

---

<sup>80</sup>Boswell, Life, I, 210, n.i.

<sup>81</sup>Works, IV, 203.

<sup>82</sup>Rambler 106; Works, IV, 204.

<sup>83</sup>I Cor. 13.4.

of St. Paul were possibly in Johnson's mind as he administered this rebuke to the pride of Bacon. Both moralists knew well the words of the Apostle on charity; in fact, Bacon, in The Advancement, quotes extensively from the Pauline epistles to demonstrate authoritative sanction for his contention that true knowledge of the natural world complements and reinforces Christian faith.<sup>84</sup> The Christian foundation for the spirit of service to their fellow man is the same for both Johnson and Bacon; however, in Johnson's case, this spirit is all-pervasive and bears a distinctive cast which is a reflection of his own troubled personality.

The knowledge that he had been endowed by God with the gift of writing meant, for Francis Bacon, the exercise of this gift in God's service, in the performance of what Johnson called "the duty which Providence assigns him." In The Writer's Prayer, Bacon invokes the aid of the Deity to assist him in this duty:

Wherefore if we labour in thy works, thou wilt make us partakers of thy Vision and thy Sabbath. We humbly beg that this mind may be steadfastly in us, and that thou, by our hands and also by the hands of others on whom thou shalt bestow the same spirit, wilt please to convey a largeness of new alms to thy family of Mankind.<sup>85</sup>

When Samuel Johnson states that it is "always the writer's

---

<sup>84</sup>Works, III, 266ff.

<sup>85</sup>Works, VII, 260

duty to make the world better," he is expressing the same spirit of Christian service evident in Bacon's prayer; he is also expressing a classical conception of the writer's didactic function which, persisting coextensively with the Christian tradition and reinforcing it, was as valid for Johnson as it was for Bacon. What we do not find in the latter figure, but which is a powerful factor in Johnson's personality, is the fear of death and damnation. It is a factor which gives a melancholy cast to much of his work and causes him to place a compensatory emphasis upon the means of salvation. Early Christian doctrine, reflecting the needs and the situation of a small and beleaguered community of believers, set the standard of charity as brotherly love, with aid to the needy as social duty; however, over the centuries, dogmatic religion was to corrupt original doctrine and to make almsgiving not an end in itself, but a prime requisite for salvation. Samuel Johnson, who clung desperately to the certainties he found in religious orthodoxy, illustrates in his own words the contemporary doctrine which equated the giving of alms with the building of a credit balance in God's ledger:

Charity, for instance, is not definable by limits. It is a duty to give to the poor; but no man can say how much another should give to the poor, or when a man has given too little to save his soul.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup>Boswell, Life, II, 250.

Despite this apparent difference in the religious temper of the two moralists, their basic purpose remains the same: to employ their talents in dutiful service to God and to the benefit of mankind in the spirit of true charity which, as Johnson says, "arises from faith in the promises of God, and expects rewards only in a future state."<sup>87</sup>

To move from the study of moral intention to the study of manner, is to discover further ties which unite the two philosophers. Most obviously, there is a basis for comparison in the complete mastery of the English language which both men exhibit. In the specific stylistic features of balance, parallelism, antitheses, and aphorisms, there are manifest parallels; nevertheless, in terms of total effect the language of Johnson remains uniquely his own, and the "Johnsonese" of The Rambler is not the language of the Baconian Essays. This "Johnsonese" is an individualistic style not susceptible of easy analysis; nonetheless, in respect to the important element of philosophic terminology, and in the use of mechanical metaphor and diction, Johnson, as one study has shown, is looking back to the seventeenth century:

. . . to the language of mechanical philosophy which he found, both literal and metaphoric, in writers from Bacon to Locke and which he applied to psychology in a metaphoric way that was in degree of abstraction and pervasiveness peculiarly his own.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Sermon IV; Works (Troy, New York), XVI, p. 115.

<sup>88</sup> W. K. Wimsatt, Philosophic Words (New Haven, 1948), p. 101.

"It has been my principal intention," Johnson says of these essays, "to inculcate wisdom or piety."<sup>89</sup> This worthy end is to be achieved not by promoting innovation but by reinforcing old and fundamental truths. The intention dictates to a degree the format; hence, the introductory pattern of many a Rambler essay consists of the formal citation of a moral maxim containing a gem of some such fundamental truth. This, in turn, serves the essayist as a springboard from which he launches into an expansion of the moral meaning and its practical application to the social and moral problems men face in their daily lives. This form of treatment lends itself more readily to the magistral rather than the initiative method of instruction advocated by Bacon and, consequently, bears the inherent risk of awakening in the reader's mind the "natural hatred" against necessity and constraint of which Bacon had warned. Samuel Johnson, better fitted by pedagogic background and by temperament to adopt the magistral method, is as fully aware of this risk as was Bacon; hence, throughout his essays, he acts upon this awareness with a masterful use of the very flexibility and indirection of approach recommended in The Advancement as the means of minimizing this potential danger. "Go into the street," says Johnson, "and give one man a lecture on morality, and another a shilling. And see which

---

<sup>89</sup>Rambler 208; Works, V, 319.

will respect you most."<sup>90</sup> This appraisal of the difficulty of "bending" man's will to virtue comes from a wide experience of the world, and is in the spirit of the Baconian dictum: "be aware of what is in our power and what is not." The Johnson of The Rambler is an essayist who must write to live, and this necessitates that he hold his reader; on the other hand, he is a moralist who holds it to be the primary duty and obligation of the writer to instruct; the essays reflect the tension created by these two impulses as the realistic Johnson strives for compromise by striking a balance between them. Fully aware that many find moral instruction to be rather bitter medicine, Johnson tempers his didacticism and sugar-coats his moral pill to make it more palatable. Many essays of serious tone convey conviction and win acceptance by the sheer power of their prose. Others are presented in the form of entertaining parables, but are well-freighted with moral implication. Lighter essays, humorous in the Johnsonian manner, are interspersed among the more serious papers to lighten the overall tone and to provide variety, while throughout the series the hortatory tone is used judiciously.

Johnson, however, concedes only so much to expediency; he does not sacrifice principle. The voice of the stern preceptor, though muted by discretion, is omnipresent. This

---

<sup>90</sup>Boswell, Life I, 440.

was a factor which, coupled with his refusal to accomodate to the popular taste of the age, alienated many readers, as he himself admitted:

As it has been my principal design to inculcate wisdom or piety, I have allotted few papers to the idle sports of imagination. Some, perhaps, may be found, of which the highest excellence is harmless merriment, but scarcely any man is so steadily serious, as not to complain, that the severity of dictatorial instruction has been too seldom relieved, and that he is driven by the sternness of the Rambler's philosophy to more cheerful and airy companions.<sup>91</sup>

The links forged by comparable goals and common methods which unite the essays of Johnson to those of Bacon could be expounded upon almost indefinitely; a further, and even more important basis of comparison derives from the inherently personal nature of the essay form, a feature which makes it a valuable instrument for gauging the essential qualities of the essayist. One of the animating spirits of the work of Francis Bacon is a broad humanitarianism which transcends contemporary prejudices and the barriers of class to embrace all degrees of mankind. Although he lived in a society which regarded the common people as little better than cattle, Bacon had "a finer and fairer view of them, as he shows in his essay, 'Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates,' and elsewhere."<sup>92</sup> Anachronistic in his own age, this "finer and

---

<sup>91</sup>Rambler 208; Works, V, 319.

<sup>92</sup>Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass: The Elizabethan Mind in Literature (Oxford, 1950), p. 192.

fairer view" of Bacon antedates by more than a century the growth of humanitarianism in the period of Johnson. It corresponds directly to the spirit of the latter, who was to write with humane concern of his country's treatment of French prisoners of war and who, like the great Lord Chancellor, was also possessed of the common touch.

Both moralists had an acute awareness of the miseries of mankind; both cherished the hope that man, through the exercise of his free will could, by his own endeavors and with God's help, regain some measure of his prelapsarian virtue to the greater glory of God and "the relief of man's estate." Virtue, then, is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for the man who follows the moral path blazed in the essays of Bacon and of Johnson. It is upon the basis of this manifest love for his fellow man that Johnson can be called an utilitarian; it is also the reason why Bacon "has also been called an utilitarian; not because he loved truth less than others, but because he loved men more."<sup>93</sup>

I have previously noted that quality of mind in both moralists which recognized in objective biography a valuable instrument of moral edification. That same quality of mind also recognized the essay form as an important vehicle of practical moral instruction, and both philosophers were to utilize it as

---

<sup>93</sup>Robert Leslie Ellis, ed., Works, by Francis Bacon (London, 1870), I, 58.



such in the fulfillment of their duty of Christian service to their fellow man. In this service both followed the precepts of The Advancement in skillfully adapting their literary means to their moral ends. It is important to recognize the innovative quality in the consistent attention to the obligations of Christian charity in the essays of both writers. Johnson fully recognized and valued this quality in the Essays of Bacon. Both writers valued their respective essays above all their other works; both expected that the intrinsic importance of their essays would be recognized and appreciated by posterity.

## CHAPTER VI

### BACON AND JOHNSON ON THE DISTURBED MIND

Francis Bacon, as I have said, was a practical moralist; so was Samuel Johnson; their practicality found common ground in a mutual interest in an important area of moral philosophy; namely, the study of the mind and its disorders, its manifest propensity for evil and its latent potentiality for good. Paul Alkon, in a recent work,<sup>94</sup> has noted this connection between the two philosophers. He sees the works of Johnson as going far to provide "precisely" the type of enquiry into this area recommended in The Advancement of Learning. This was an enquiry which Bacon held to be essential for the progress of this vital branch of moral philosophy if it was to arrive at the ultimate goal of bringing the will of man to the practise of virtue. This goal is always Bacon's abiding interest; but, in this instance, his specific concern is to see that the deficiency in the sum of moral knowledge occasioned by the previous neglect of this area be supplied.

In The Advancement of Learning, when Bacon undertakes his survey of the state of moral knowledge, he divides his study into two principal parts: the first is concerned with the "Exemplar or Platform of Good," the other with the "Regiment or Culture of the Mind." The one is theoretical and describes

---

<sup>94</sup>Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline (Northwestern University Press, 1967).

the nature of Good; the other is practical and prescribes rules to "subdue, apply, and accomodate the will of man thereunto."<sup>95</sup> Bacon does not enlarge to any extent upon the nature of good, as he finds it a field wherein the ancients, the moral philosophers, and the divines have "excellently laboured." Not so is the case of the field of the practical, "the Georgics of the Mind," which he holds to be "no less worthy to be had in honour," but which has been passed over as being less appropriate for rhetorical ornamentation. Bacon then proceeds to present his own views regarding the need for this study:

Through the negligence of our times, wherein few men take any care touching the cultivation and disposition of the mind . . . yet I will not on that account pass by it untouched, but rather conclude with that aphorism of Hippocrates, "that they who are sick and feel no pain are sick in their mind"; they need medicine not only to assuage the disease but to awake the sense. And if it be objected that the cure of men's minds belongs to sacred divinity, it is most true, but moral philosophy may be admitted into the train of theology, as a wise servant and faithful handmaid to be ready at her beck to minister to her service and requirements.<sup>96</sup>

To Bacon, the practical study of the mind is a subject of such importance that he exclaims upon the "strangeness" of its being "not yet reduced to written enquiry," and he proceeds to chart the deficiencies in this area of knowledge and the methods required to supply them. He advocates, as first in importance, a study of aptitudes and of the constituent

---

<sup>95</sup>Works, III, 412.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 422.

elements of character which are the underlying springs of action; further, he urges a "scientific and accurate dissection of minds and characters," in other words, a study of psychological types. Secondly, once the nature of mind is determined, the focus of study should be directed to the distempers of the mind and to those disorders of the affections which divert the mind from the pursuit of virtue. Consideration should also be given to the effects of custom and habit upon the will and the appetite, those ruling factors in morals and the antecedents of actions. Finally, there is required a study of the measures necessary to cultivate the mind and to inculcate good and virtuous attitudes within the compass of the subject's capacities. Such a cultivation requires an awareness of the mind's inherent limitations and demands a certain flexibility and subtlety of approach, "because of the natural hatred of the mind against necessity and constraint." This is the method of approach which I have shown to be operative in the Essays of Bacon, as well as in those of Johnson; it is also operative in the early sections of The Advancement, as Bacon seeks the support of his general reader and the favour of King James in establishing the legitimacy of the new method of learning he is propounding.

To move from the general to the particular: it is a gauge of the importance that Bacon places upon the study of the mind that he cites the qualities necessary in the philosopher who would undertake to remedy the deficiencies he has noted. One

of these declared prerequisites is a thorough knowledge of life as it is actually lived, a knowledge free of the taint which had hitherto corrupted the study of philosophy, namely: that men "have despised to be conversant in ordinary or common matters." Further, to arrive at conclusions regarding the moral course necessary for others requires a degree of worldly wisdom which encompasses a knowledge of evil as well as of good, an attribute which Bacon stresses:

So that we are much beholden to Machiavel and others, that write what men do and not what they ought to do. For it is not possible to join serpentine wisdom with the columbine innocency, except men know exactly all the conditions of the serpent . . . . Nay an honest man can do no good upon those that are wicked to reclaim them, without the help of the knowledge of evil . . . except you can make them perceive that you know the utmost reaches of their own corrupt opinions, they despise all morality.<sup>97</sup>

Particular importance is placed by Bacon upon the moral mentor best fitted to the remedial function of prescribing means to "recover and preserve the good estate of the mind":

The poets and writers of histories are the best doctors of this knowledge; where we may find painted forth with great life, how affections are kindled and excited; and how pacified and refrained; and how again contained from act and further degree; how they disclose themselves, how they work, how they vary, how they gather and fortify, how they are inwrapped one with another, and how they do fight and encounter one with another, and other the like particulars.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup>Works, III, p. 426.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 435.

In the Latin translation of the above, Bacon has expanded upon his conception of the role of the writer of histories in this context, and Spedding appends an explanatory note which reveals that the connotation which Bacon is applying to the use of the word, "historian," is that of the portrayer of "characters" who:

. . . would have a full and careful analysis made, exhibiting not the entire character, but the several features and individual peculiarities of mind and disposition which make it up, with their connexion and bearing one upon another:--a kind of moral and mental anatomy, as a basis for a system of moral and mental medicine.<sup>99</sup>

Measured against the scale of attributes we have listed, Johnson is the one practical moralist ideally cast to perform the pivotal role envisaged by Bacon. What other moralist could lay a more valid claim to a "thorough knowledge of life as it is actually lived" than could Samuel Johnson? It was a knowledge firmly grounded in personal hardship and bitter experience. Physical affliction and mental maladjustment were constant and concomitant features of his troubled journey throughout life; grinding poverty was his intractable traveling companion until the latter part of that journey. Despite the compelling nature of these handicaps, Johnson was always able to rise above the limitations they would impose upon him. Upon arrival in London, he sank into the lowly anonymity of

---

<sup>99</sup>Works, III, p. 436n.

the nether world of Grubstreet hackwork, to the slums, and to the scholar's life of "toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail." A lesser man would have remained submerged, but Johnson gradually lifted himself from the miasma of these surroundings in his rise to literary fame and personal prominence. Throughout his life he came to know every level of society, from the lowliest denizens of the streets to the bourgeois affluence of Streatham and the pride of aristocracy. Always he was to remain the same Samuel Johnson, always his own man, whether formerly as the unregarded suppliant in the anterooms of the great, or later as the literary lion sought after to dignify their salons. He was never to lose the common touch; consequently, no other man could be freer of the taint which Bacon held to be so inimical to moral philosophy, namely: the false pride which disdained to "be conversant in ordinary and common matters." In fact, it was concerning such common and ordinary matters that Johnson delighted to expound, as witness his frequently displayed knowledge relative to the mechanic arts. All knowledge that was of practical benefit to man in this world interested Johnson, just as it had interested Bacon.

Few men have delved more deeply into the knowledge which comes from books than had Samuel Johnson; however, for the practical knowledge to be drawn from life, his teacher was experience; his school was the city of London; it was in this world in microcosm that he mastered the worldly knowledge of

both good and evil. This qualification, together with his other attributes, eminently fitted Johnson for the task of administering mental and moral physic in the service to which Bacon assigns a high priority, namely: the recovery and preservation of the "good estate" of the mind. For this service Bacon claims the best doctors are "the poets and writers of histories." Johnson, formed in the very image of the "doctor" envisaged by Bacon, is preeminently fitted for this role. As writer of verse, as writer of fiction, and as moralist, Johnson is a poet by any definition of the term; he is just as certainly a writer of history and, particularly in the Lives, he reveals his gift for the perceptive analysis and dissection of character which is the chief distinction of the historian in Bacon's connotation of the term. In addition, Johnson views the importance of the poetic function in this service in the same light as does Bacon; for implicit throughout Rambler 106 is the contention that the true moralist is the only true poet, dealing as he does with the general and the unchanging in human nature rather than with the transient and the fleeting.

One further important attribute which Johnson brought to the study of the mind was the knowledge which had accrued to him through his lifelong interest in the field of medicine. A. D. Atkinson, in compiling a list of the prose reading in English with which Johnson is known to have been familiar,<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup>"Dr. Johnson's English Prose Reading," N & Q (1953), pp. 290-91.



has disclosed an impressive number of works on medicine and surgery. From this list one might surmise that Johnson's interest is diffused and general; whereas, the weight of contrary evidence indicates his interest is particularized and is focused upon the study of morbid psychology as it related to his own mental state and to that of others. His was a mind which confirmed the evidence of observation by the touchstone of introspection, and the natural flow or direction of his thought processes was "to follow upon and generalize from highly personal experience, so that all his ideas about the general human situation are in an important sense an extension of private sensibility."<sup>101</sup> This private sensibility gave Johnson an acute awareness of his own mental maladjustments: his compulsive tic, his chronic melancholia, and his morbid fear of insanity. Of this latter aberrancy, Mrs. Piozzi was to comment:

His over-anxious care to retain without blemish the perfect sanity of his mind, contributed much to disturb it . . . . He had studied medicine diligently in all its branches; but had given particular attention to the diseases of the imagination which he watched in himself with a solicitude destructive of his own peace, and intolerable to those he trusted.<sup>102</sup>

This hypersensitivity concerning his own mental state

---

<sup>101</sup>Arieh Sachs, Passionate Intelligence: Imagination and Reason in the Work of Samuel Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 10.

<sup>102</sup>"Anecdotes," in Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I, 199-200.

impelled Johnson in the direction of self-diagnosis; this, in turn, provided a fund of knowledge and a skill in analysis which was not only a valuable asset for a writer who avowed a central concern for "the moral discipline of the mind," but was also of utmost practical service when applied with his penetrative insight to the diagnosis of the mental disturbances of others. Johnson's intense personal involvement in this area is a further complement to the list of qualities which Bacon required of the moralist who would undertake the study of the disturbed mind. The latter, in enumerating these qualities, has drawn the picture of Samuel Johnson, as moralist, to the life, while at the same time he has drawn the picture of Francis Bacon. As poets, historians, and moralists, both men possess in full measure the attributes listed.

Although Johnson was to build upon the base established by Bacon, his wide-ranging investigations could not be contained within the tentative boundaries sketched by the latter, for, as Paul Alkon says:

Johnson went far beyond Bacon's simple equation of mental diseases with distempered affections: the importance of maintaining proper balance among the higher faculties as well as the need for keeping appetites and passions duly controlled is a recurring topic throughout Johnson's career as a moralist. In a wide range of different literary contexts he suggests numerous methods of preserving such balance in order to prevent what Imlac refers to as "disorders of the intellect." The greater complexity of Johnson's analysis of "the diseases and infirmities of the mind," however, is merely an extension of, rather than a departure from, the

Baconian view that such analysis is an essential aspect of "the regiment or culture of the mind."<sup>103</sup>

Francis Bacon, to use his own figure of speech, had "coasted" the desert reaches and the cultivated shores of the world of knowledge; he had charted the approaches to the unknown areas which invited exploration; he had marked the beachheads from which such exploration could be launched. More than a century was to elapse before Samuel Johnson became the first to follow in the track of Bacon to the particular landfall marking the Terra Incognita of the disturbed mind. From the beachhead charted by Bacon, and following the Baconian directions, Johnson struck out into the vast hinterland of this unexplored area. Not by theorizing from afar, but by practical on-site observations, Johnson took surveys of this land and established the bench marks which were to become the basic reference points from which many aspects of modern psychological studies have developed. Of this contribution, it has been said:

Johnson's own sense of the working of the human imagination probably provides us with the closest anticipation of Freud to be found in psychology or moral writing before the twentieth century.<sup>104</sup>

Although this does not imply that Freud was influenced by Johnson, there is substantial support for the assessment:

---

<sup>103</sup>Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline (Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 211-12.

<sup>104</sup>Walter Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, p. 93.

". . . that Johnson made outstanding contributions to the psychoanalytic heritage which the twentieth century inherited from the past."<sup>105</sup>

Three centuries ago, Bacon "stands at the threshold of modernity, and pronounces . . . the new idea of science."<sup>106</sup> Johnson, closer to us in time, stands in that same relationship to the present-day science of psychoanalysis. Both men are, as it were, poised between two worlds: they look forward to the world of the future; they also look backward to the world of the past; both appear uncertain of their next step; neither is able to drive through to a conclusive synthesis. In the background of Samuel Johnson there looms the figure of Robert Burton, as well as that of Francis Bacon, and the influence of the seventeenth-century anatomist upon Johnson was considerable. Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy has also been claimed to be an anticipation of Freudian psychology,<sup>107</sup> and it is possible that, in probing this work for a comprehension of his own neuroses, Johnson gained many insights into the workings of the imagination. If such is the case, there is justice in the claim of one writer that, by conceding that modern

---

<sup>105</sup>Kathleen M. Grange, "Samuel Johnson's Account of Certain Psychoanalytic Concepts," in Samuel Johnson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Donald J. Greene (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1965), p. 149.

<sup>106</sup>D. G. James, The Dream of Learning (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 29.

<sup>107</sup>See Bergan Evans, The Psychiatry of Robert Burton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

conceptions of the human psyche:

. . . were arrived at in complete independence of Burton, then we have another instance of the depth and breadth of Dr. Johnson's understanding. For his intellectual acuteness, impelled by the agony of his heart, led him to see more clearly into Burton's meaning than did his own age and several generations which followed him.<sup>108</sup>

In any assessment of the importance of Johnson's contribution to modern psychiatric knowledge, his possible indebtedness to Robert Burton is clearly worthy of consideration; However, to attempt any comparative analysis of the respective influences of Bacon and of Burton in reference to this particular aspect would be neither fruitful nor pertinent, as such influences would not be mutually exclusive. Certainly, the neurotic side of Johnson's nature would be expected to react strongly to the words of Burton, the melancholy and scholarly recluse of Oxford; just as certainly, the rational side of Johnson's nature would be expected to respond to the inspirational words of Bacon, whose moral philosophy, like his own, was hammered out on the hard anvil of life and given the same practical temper in the forge of worldly contention.

To move from this rather involved area to one which is more amenable to study: What is the source of the evidence which ensures Johnson's place in the history of psychiatric

---

<sup>108</sup> Richard B. Hovey, "Dr. Samuel Johnson, Psychiatrist," MLQ, XV (Dec. 1954), 325.

knowledge? Some of this evidence is to be found scattered throughout the periodical essays, but the primary source is Rasselas, a work which has been described as "introducing a new understanding and a new dimension" to the investigation of the mind.<sup>109</sup> Rasselas is a novel with a plot of the barest simplicity and a story stripped to the merest essentials; yet, withal, a work of such complexity that it can be interpreted on many levels of meaning. So multi-faceted is the work that its central theme has been variously interpreted as comic, as tragic, or as a combination of both. A moral fable it certainly is, and it is a gauge of Johnson's genius that he has been able to freight the conventional vehicle of an allegorical journey with such a wealth of moral meaning and to subtly convey that meaning through the medium of dramatic irony.

The satiric irony of Rasselas probes below superficialities to expose and to explode all of the forms of escapism which lure the mind away from the harsh world of reality and into the comforting but illusory world of imagination. As a work of satire, Rasselas could be expected to have a fixed reference point in a norm of approved behavior. Such a norm has been thought to be embodied in the character of Imlac; however, although the poet-philosopher serves frequently as

---

<sup>109</sup>Kathleen M. Grange, "Dr. Samuel Johnson's Account of a Schizophrenic Illness in Rasselas (1959)," Medical History, VI (1962), 164.

the mouthpiece for Johnsonian moral dicta, he is merely another persona and bears the same relationship to Johnson as Gulliver bears to Jonathan Swift. The satiric norm is not embodied in any one character; instead, what is implied is a norm of common sense and right reason against which all deviations, ranging from vague idealism to madness, stand out in stark relief. Escapism in any form is anathema to Johnson, and "instinctive hostility to any solution that seems to savor of escapism is one of the most consistent traits in Johnson's psychology."<sup>110</sup> When Johnson speaks in Rasselas of the "dangerous prevalence of imagination," and refers to any predominance of fancy over reason as "a degree of insanity," he is speaking from his own torment of spirit of the insidious power which had sapped his own strength of will, and had made him only too well aware of the price exacted for staying "too long in the theatre."

Rasselas is undoubtedly a satire on the unrealistic view of life; and, whatever else it may be, it is also a brilliant study of the case histories of different psychological types suffering from the common delusions and obsessions which afflict mankind. In this context certain chapters of the work, it has been claimed:

---

<sup>110</sup>Donald Greene, The Politics of Samuel Johnson, p.136.

. . . suggest insights into neurosis which are comparable to those of modern psychiatry: that anxiety is the central symptom of the depressed; that the anguish of guilt, the over-laden conscience, weighs heavily on the melancholiac; that such persons seek ease and expiation by further self-punishment ie, self-aggressions; that they are driven to "superstition," ie, compulsive rituals; that sexual disturbances are a contributing factor in melancholia; that the symptoms of such illnesses are but exaggerations or intensifications of tendencies in the non-neurotic personality; and that the deeper causes of the victory of "fancy" over "reason" cannot be reached by ordinary rational processes--in a word, lie in the unconscious.<sup>111</sup>

In this early study of the etiology of psychosis, Johnson, by means of Imlac's delineation of the case history of the paranoid astronomer, unveils what is "not only a classic but probably the first detailed analysis of schizophrenia in the English language."<sup>112</sup> If Imlac can be said to represent Johnson as ethical man, the astronomer can be said to represent Johnson as neurotic man; and the Johnsonian insight into his own neuroses is revealed in the words of Imlac which depict the melancholic aberrations of the obsessed astronomer, and which prescribe for the alleviation of that state the very palliatives Johnson had found effective in relieving his own condition. This condition of Johnson has

---

<sup>111</sup>Hovey, "Dr. Samuel Johnson, Psychiatrist," MLQ, XV (Dec. 1954), 324.

<sup>112</sup>Grange, "Samuel Johnson's Account of Certain Psycho-analytic Concepts," p. 150. This writer further adds, in "Dr. Samuel Johnson's Account of Schizophrenic Illness in Rasselas (1759)," that this case history was recognized in Johnson's time as marking an important advance in the understanding of insanity, and was valued as such by the medical men of the following century.



itself been the subject of many recent studies, studies which have extended even to the investigation of a possible masochistic element in his character hinted at by Mrs. Thrale.<sup>113</sup> His neuroses have been variously interpreted in Jungian, Adlerian, and Freudian terms, all of which interpretations although interesting in themselves, are neither relevant to the purposes of this thesis nor do they bring us much closer to an understanding of the enigma which is Johnson. For those who would presume to reduce Samuel Johnson to an easy codification, the best answer is that provided by himself when Goldsmith proposed to the members of the Club that they add another to the roster, for the reason that they had all "travelled over one another's minds." "Sir," was Johnson's retort--and one would like to know the tone--"you have not travelled over my mind, I promise you."<sup>114</sup>

It is a mistake to consider the history of the study of abnormal psychology as representing an ordered scale of progression; rather, from the stage of lively interest in the seventeenth century to the achievements of modern psychiatry, there is a desert area characterized by what can be called "intellectual retrogression."<sup>115</sup> Throughout this long

---

<sup>113</sup>Katherine C. Balderston, "Johnson's Vile Melancholy," in Age of Johnson Essays Presented to Chauncey Brewster Tinker (New Haven: 1949), pp. 3-14.

<sup>114</sup>Boswell, Life, IV, 183.

<sup>115</sup>Evans, The Psychiatry of Robert Burton, pp. 110-11.

interregnum, Samuel Johnson stands apart as the first to accept the challenge represented by Bacon's summons to this field of study and the first to follow the Baconian directives in its pursuit.

Although Johnson's work does not represent any clinical study, it is no less valid on that account. What it does represent is acute observation and insight, and it possesses the same intrinsic merit which Johnson recognized in the Baconian Essays, namely: that of being the product of a "strong mind operating upon life."

Francis Bacon, the pioneer of modern science, writing over three centuries ago, characterized the creative writer as the individual best qualified to undertake the study of the disordered mind; Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of modern psychiatry, and himself an important moralist, echoes the thought of Bacon in speaking of the role of the creative writer in modern psychiatry:

. . . the description of the human mind is indeed the domain which is most his own; he has from time immemorial been the precursor of science, and so too of scientific psychology  
 . . . the creative writer cannot evade the psychiatrist nor the psychiatrist the creative writer.<sup>116</sup>

In the light of Dr. Johnson's extensive studies in this area, it would be difficult to establish to what degree he

---

<sup>116</sup>Sigmund Freud, Complete Psychological Works, general ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), IX, 43-44.

draws directly upon Baconian instructions in undertaking the study of the disturbed mind. However, where there is a manifest correlation between the two men is in the similarity of mental constitution which caused Johnson not only to see the importance of such a study in the same light as did Francis Bacon, but also caused him to pursue that study upon the very lines envisaged in the latter's work. I have shown this similarity of mental constitution evidenced in a similar approach to biography and to the essay form; this study of the mind is yet another example of how close is the link between the two philosophers.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ETHICS OF EVALUATION

In exploring only one section of the broad field of psychological investigation opened up by Bacon, I have attempted to show how Johnson has followed the guidelines and the suggestions laid down as appropriate for this investigation by the earlier philosopher. Other important areas of Bacon's psychological speculations have received close attention by the English philosophers who followed him and have proven to be fruitful sources of expanded research, particularly so in the case of John Locke and his followers. To attempt to determine whether Johnson's use of Baconian concepts related to these latter areas derives directly from the works of Bacon or indirectly through intermediate sources such as Locke or Isaac Watts--both popular with Johnson--would be a difficult skein to unravel. It suffices to say that such references appear frequently throughout the Johnsonian canon.

Through the "practical" tendency of his philosophy, and through Locke, Bacon was the father alike of English psychological speculation and of the empirical method in the department of ethics.<sup>117</sup>

This quotation supports the statements which we have made regarding Bacon's important role in influencing psychological

---

<sup>117</sup>Charles Singer, "Francis Bacon," Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago, 1943), II, 883.

speculation; however, our present concern is with the latter part of the quotation: what of Francis Bacon as the "father" of the empirical method in the department of ethics? At first glance, this would appear to be a branch of theoretical science for which the practical Johnson, with his distaste for theory, would have little affinity. Nevertheless, it will be my concern in this chapter to illustrate how one important element of Bacon's contribution to logic and to ethics is directly related to what has been called Johnson's "most important piece of philosophical writing,"<sup>118</sup> namely: A Review of Soame Jenyns' "A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil."

One of the many subjects in which Bacon found Aristotle's treatment "deficient" was in the latter's analysis of the sophisms of rhetoric; hence, one of the purposes of his writing Of the Coulers of Good and Evill (1597), was to correct the Greek philosopher's handling of the subject. He is also concerned to defend and "to stir the earth a little about the roots" of the science of rhetoric, and to redefine its function: "The duty and office of Rhetoric is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will."<sup>119</sup> The work was also to serve as a touchstone for the detection of rhetoric misapplied, "a means of arming the listener or reader

---

<sup>118</sup>Stuart Gerry Brown, "Dr. Johnson and the Old Order," Samuel Johnson, ed. Donald J. Greene (1965), p. 163.

<sup>119</sup>Works, III, 409.

against the legerdemain of language used in the service of specious proof."<sup>120</sup>

"In deliberatives the point is, what is good and what is evil, and of good what is greater, and of evil what is less." Thus does Bacon begin his early treatment of the logic of evaluation and his emendation of the labours of Aristotle in the same field. With sceptical aim and empirical method he presents, and then refutes, a series of sophisms which are generally held by common opinion to be true. A significant feature of the refutation is that it does not involve the presentation of contrary arguments or of more valid axioms; instead, there is the dissection and breaking down, point by point, of the structure of specious reasoning which has brought acceptance of these sophisms as general rules. Bacon claims that Aristotle has not only failed to make this necessary refutation but has also failed to recognize the importance of doing so. Further, insofar as these sophisms pertain to rhetoric, and the appeal is to the imagination, "their use is not more for probation than for affecting and moving . . . therefore the points and stings of words are by no means to be neglected."<sup>121</sup> Whether the appeal be directed to imagination or to reason, any fallacies in that appeal must be

---

<sup>120</sup> Anne Righter, "Francis Bacon," The English Mind, eds. Hugh Sykes Davies, George Watson (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), p. 14.

<sup>121</sup> De Augmentis; Works, IV, 458.

contradicted. One writer has expressed the disparity of method in these words:

Aristotle's way was to proceed from the common opinion or prejudice and refine that opinion or prejudice into philosophic truth, Bacon's way was to destroy the common opinion or prejudice, and introduce uncertainty.<sup>122</sup>

What is the essential importance of the subject itself and of this new method of arriving at correct ethical conclusions? Bacon's own assessment is as follows:

To make a true and safe judgment, nothing can be of greater use and defence to the mind, than the discovering and reprehension of these colours showing in what cases they hold, and in what they deceive . . . so being performed, it so cleareth man's judgment and election, as it is the less likely to slide into any error.<sup>123</sup>

For a modern assessment of Bacon's own contribution to this field of study in Of the Coulers of Good and Evill, we may consider the opinion of Professor Toulmin, an authority in this field, who has prefaced a recent study with the statement that he is taking up the subject where it was left in Bacon's Coulers, and his words on the latter work serve to place it in a proper historical perspective:

This early interest in the notions of ethics failed to keep the same place in his thoughts as did his passion for the

---

<sup>122</sup>Howard B. White, Peace Among the Willows (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), p. 35.

<sup>123</sup>Of the Coulers of Good and Evill; Works, VII, 77. The Coulers appears in an amplified form in the De Augmentis. I will be quoting from both versions.

possibilities of science. And this is perhaps a pity, for certainly few since his time have brought to the study of ethics quite the lucidity and straightforwardness which mark his work. The obscurity from which he rescued inductive reasoning still envelops evaluation.<sup>124</sup>

A key reference in the above quotation is that which relates to the "obscurity" which envelops evaluation. This would indicate that the Baconian approach stimulated no immediate advances in the direction indicated, either in the area of theory or in the practical application of his method.

To return once again to Samuel Johnson, I will now endeavor to trace the threads which link this rather neglected work of Bacon to the writings of the "Great Cham" of eighteenth-century literature. First, it is appropriate to emphasize that Johnson knew Bacon's Coulers well; the evidence of the Dictionary reveals that he has quoted from the work seven times in the first volume alone.<sup>125</sup> This could be considered a number rather disproportionately large, considering that the work itself is fragmentary and comprises but fifteen pages of the Spedding edition of Bacon's Works. Secondly, the problem of good and evil, the subject with which Bacon opens the Coulers, was a particularly vital issue in the age of Johnson when the rise of optimistic Deism brought a new sense of urgency to the investigation of how, as Soame Jenyns

---

<sup>124</sup>Stephen Edelston Toulmin, An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics (Cambridge: University Press, 1958).

<sup>125</sup>Freed, "The Sources of Johnson's Dictionary," p. 47.



phrased it: "Evil of any kind can be the production of infinite Goodness, joined with infinite Power." Not only does Jenyns pose the question but he attempts an answer in his theodicy, A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil. This work was one of the most popular of the many publications which at that time were presenting the Deistic position relative to the important doctrine of the Great Chain of Being and the concomitant principle of Plenitude.

This doctrine has a long history, with roots extending back to Greek philosophy and with forms of it appearing throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods. The popularity of the doctrine in the eighteenth century was not due directly to early sources but to Locke and to Leibnitz, "the two philosophers whose reputation and influence were greatest in the ensuing fifty years."<sup>126</sup> In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke states the general position succinctly:

In all the visible corporeal world we see no chasms or gaps. All quite down from us the descent is by easy steps, and a continued series that in each remove differ very little one from the other . . . . And when we consider the infinite power and wisdom of the Maker, we have reason to think, that it is suitable to the magnificent harmony of the universe, and the great design and infinite goodness of the architect, that the species of creatures should also, by gentle degrees, ascend upwards from us towards his infinite perfection, as we see they gradually descend from us downwards.<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> Arthur Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 184.

<sup>127</sup> ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959), II, 67-68.

By application of the principle of plenitude, it is implied that there are no gaps in the chain and that every life form has been fully realized in fulfillment of God's purpose in creation.

It is difficult today to conceive of the degree of general acceptance of the concept of the Chain of Being in the eighteenth century, for, in Professor Lovejoy's words:

There has been no period in which writers of all sorts--men of science and philosophers, poets and popular essayists, deists and orthodox divines--talked so much about the Chain of Being, or accepted more implicitly the general scheme of ideas connected with it, or more boldly drew from these their latent implications, or apparent implication . . . . Next to the word "Nature" the "Great Chain of Being" was the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century, playing a part somewhat analagous to that of the blessed word "evolution" in the late nineteenth.<sup>128</sup>

To posit a scale of being ranging from the inanimate to the infinite as part of a cosmic scheme which, while perfect in its totality, is only seemingly imperfect in its parts, was a particularly attractive option to many thinkers in the eighteenth century. Such a scale, with its gradations implying the principle of a necessary subordination, was as though made to order for those who felt the need of a philosophic shore to prop up the rather shaky concept of society as static, with gradations based upon a scale measured in property rights. A problem arose in relation to the paradoxical

---

<sup>128</sup>The Great Chain of Being, pp. 183-84.

presence of evil in this divine scheme. The anthropocentric doctrine, while highly flattering to human vanity, could not readily accomodate the existence of things which were obviously not instrumental to man's well-being. One alternative was to deny any central role for man and to see him only as another link in the chain; then, conveniently, the suffering of man could be seen as possibly benefiting the chain as a whole, or other parts of the chain. Soame Jenyns' theodicy is of this nature, but it is particularly noteworthy for the smug complacency which underlies the stand that pain and poverty for the individual are absolutely necessary for the general happiness of the whole. In addition, there is a certain bland fatuity in the celebration of the compensations of poverty, and in the acceptance of the ignorance resulting from lack of education as being a beneficent "opiate" and a "cordial" administered by a gracious providence.

It is this advocacy of social injustice in the attempt to base an optimistic world view on such monstrous premises which undoubtedly fired Johnson to make his scathing review of Jenyns' work. What of these compensations which Jenyns claims are attendant upon the states of poverty and of ignorance? It is in rebuttal of these claims that we see Johnson at his most austere and, at the same time, at his most humane. The austerity comes through in the tone of stern reproof with which his massive common sense cuts through the cant of Jenyns' statements; the humanitarianism comes through in the revelation

of his own stance on these claims; the combination of both factors produces some of his most memorable phrases. The happiness attributed to a state of poverty which, to be endured, requires the "opiate of insensibility" is, he declares: "like that of a malefactor, who ceases to feel the cords that bind him, when the pincers are tearing his flesh." His denial of the argument for the withholding of education contains one of his most noble statements:

I am always afraid of determining on the side of envy or cruelty. The privileges of education may, sometimes, be improperly bestowed, but I shall always fear to withhold them, lest I should be yielding to the suggestions of pride, while I persuade myself that I am following the maxims of policy; and under the appearance of salutary restraints, should be indulging the lust of dominion, and that malevolence which delights in seeing others depressed.<sup>129</sup>

These, as we have said, are issues which could be expected to draw a strong reaction from Johnson; however, they are issues subsidiary to the primary concern of A Free Enquiry: the problem of evil. How does one dispose of this knotty problem in a theodicy based on the concept of the Great Chain of Being? Jenyns' answer is to find that, in relation to his great Scale, evil is only so in appearance; in effect, he sweeps it under the rug where it disappears. Johnson, to whom evil was always vividly real, could not accept this neat solution and, characteristically, he strikes to the heart of

---

<sup>129</sup>Review of "A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil." Works (Troy, New York), XIII, pp. 230-31.

the issue by challenging both the concept of the Great Chain of Being and the doctrine of Plenitude, and this he does with devastating effect. It is a measure of Johnson's courage and his bold individuality that he should dare to attack doctrines so firmly entrenched that, though some voices had been raised against them, they had not been seriously challenged in his society for generations, doctrines which had been upheld by men like Locke, Pope, Addison, and Law. Nor should we forget that in attacking the base itself he is indirectly undermining the social corollaries which were drawn from these doctrines and which were of utmost services in upholding the ruling class of his day. Nevertheless, attack it he did, and the comparative ease with which his logic demolished the specious reasoning which had supported these doctrines would make one wonder why it had not been done before. The palpable fact is that no one had previously thought to challenge an opinion so commonly held.

We have now come full circle and are back to Francis Bacon and Of the Coulers of Good and Evill; for, was it not this very work which stressed most emphatically the necessity of challenging such common opinion? It is my contention that in the very undertaking of the task of investigating the Chain of Being, Johnson is putting into practise the injunction of Bacon in this regard, and is applying it to one of the most firmly rooted opinions of his day. Furthermore, in undertaking the probe of this concept and of its corollary

doctrines, he is following the method of Bacon. Step by step he penetrates through to the inherent sophistry of these doctrines and, as he demolishes piece by piece the underpinnings of the argument which supports them, the entire structure falls to the ground and--once more in the manner of Bacon--he leaves it where it falls!

Is the Chain of Being a true continuum as necessarily implied by the principle of plenitude? Can that principle be supported by reason or empirical evidence? Here is Johnson:

Every Reason which can be brought to prove, that there are Beings of every possible sort, will prove that there is the greatest Number possible of every Sort of Beings; but this, with respect to Man we know, if we know anything, not to be true . . . . The Scale of Existence from Infinity to Nothing cannot possibly have Being. The highest Being not infinite must be, as has been often observed, at an infinite Distance below Infinity . . . . And in this Distance between finite and infinite, there will be Room for ever for an infinite Series of indefinable Existence . . . . Creation, wherever it stops, must stop infinitely below infinity and on the other infinity above nothing . . . . Nor is this all. In the Scale, wherever it begins or ends, are endless Vacuities. At whatever Distance we suppose the next Order of Beings to be above Man, there is room for an intermediate Order of Beings between them; and if for one order, then for infinite orders; since everything that admits of more or less, and consequently all the Parts of that which admits them, may be infinitely divided. So that, as far as we can judge, there may be Room in the Vacuity between any two Steps of the Scale, or between any two Points of the Cone of Being, for infinite Exertion of Infinite Power.<sup>130</sup>

The whole, though perfect in itself, requires imperfection and just inferiority in its subordinate parts, claims Jenyns,

---

<sup>130</sup>Review, pp. 223ff.

and "these Evils of Imperfections, proceeding from the necessary inferiority of some beings in comparison to others can in no sense be called any Evils at all." Johnson counters:

It does not appear, even to the imagination, that of three orders of being, the first and the third receive any advantages from the imperfection of the second, or that, indeed, they may not equally exist, though the second had never been, or should cease to be; and why should that be concluded necessary, which cannot be proved even to be useful?<sup>131</sup>

Thus does Johnson bluntly demolish the view of Jenyns and completely justify his own conclusive assessment:

This Scale of Being I have demonstrated to be raised by presumptuous Imagination, to rest on Nothing at the Bottom, to lean on Nothing at the Top, and to have Vacuities from step to step through which any Order of Being may sink into Nihilicity without any Inconvenience, so far as we can Judge, to the next Rank above or below it . . . . A system has been raised, which is so ready to fall to pieces of itself, that no great praise can be derived from its destruction.<sup>132</sup>

Logically, Johnson is fully justified in his rather contemptuous dismissal of this system and in his assumption that it has been completely discredited; whereas, in actuality, neither Johnson's criticisms nor the similar attacks of Voltaire had much apparent effect at the time. As Professor Lovejoy has said: "Throughout the century the assumptions of plenitude, continuity, and gradation continued . . . to

---

<sup>131</sup>Review, p. 224.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., pp. 234ff.

operate powerfully upon men's minds, especially in the biological sciences."<sup>133</sup>

These words reveal the inveterate tendency of the human mind to cling tenaciously to what Bacon refers to as "the mischievous authority of systems." Through this tendency the common opinion--in this case one of the Idols of the Theatre--has, by the power of custom and of superstition, been invested with all the force of prescription, and has created an almost impregnable stronghold of error.

"The end of logic," says Bacon, "is to teach a form of argument to secure reason, and not to entrap it; the end likewise of moral philosophy is to procure the affections to fight on the side of reason, and not to invade it."<sup>134</sup> In Johnson's Review there is an implicit endorsement of Bacon's statement, both in terms of the means employed and in the end achieved. In the Coulers, as in Johnson's work, the end of logic is attained when sophistry has been exposed and reason has been freed from enslavement to the Idols. No new synthesis is attempted. In the Review he suggests no alternative approach to the problem of evil but comments briefly on the vast scope of the problem. It is sufficient for Johnson, just as it was for Bacon, that reason has been reinstated upon her throne, for from right reason truth must proceed--an obvious truism

---

<sup>133</sup>The Great Chain of Being, pp. 254-55.

<sup>134</sup>De Augmentis; Works, IV, 455-56.



for a man who had stated: "He who thinks reasonably must think morally."

When Professor Toulmin speaks in high praise of the "lucidity and straightforwardness" which mark Bacon's work in the Coulers, the same words of praise could, with equal propriety, be applied to the work of Johnson we have just discussed. Bacon and Johnson exhibit a comparable power of vivid expression and the same gift for apothegm and the trenchant phrase; both possess an incisive logic which cuts through sophistic verbiage and cleaves to essentials; both possess a certain ruthless force which cannot be satisfied with the mere lopping of branches from the rank growth of error but must strike at the very roots thereof.

The necessity of eradicating such rank errors motivates Bacon's writing of the Coulers; the same impelling force motivates Johnson's writing of the Review. Evil, as I have said, was always vividly real to Johnson; he was quick to ferret it out and to attack it in any of its guises. In Rambler 4 he assails those writers who paint evil in the attractive colours of virtue and thereby "confound the colours of right and wrong":

It is of the utmost importance to mankind, that positions of this tendency be laid open and confuted; for while men consider good and evil as springing from the same root, they will spare the one for the sake of the other, and in judging, if not at least of themselves, will be apt to estimate their virtues by their vices. To this fatal error all those will contribute, who confound the colours of right and wrong, and

instead of helping to settle their boundaries, mix them with so much art, that no common mind is able to disunite them . . . . Vice, for vice is necessary to be shown, should always disgust; nor should the graces of gaiety, or the dignity of courage, be so united with it, as to reconcile it to the mind . . . . It is therefore to be steadily inculcated, that virtue is the highest proof of understanding, and the only solid basis of greatness; and that vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts, that it begins in mistake and ends in ignominy.<sup>135</sup>

This concern to ensure that virtue is "steadily inculcated" forms an important criterion in Johnson's literary judgments; it can be seen, for example, as forming the basis of his attack upon Fielding's characterization of Tom Jones, for in Johnson's words: "It is not a sufficient vindication of a character, that it is drawn as it appears, for many characters ought never to be drawn."<sup>136</sup>

It is possible to cite works of other philosophers wherein false systems and ideas have been attacked logically and effectively. However, where the Coulers and the Review stand apart from such other works is in a motivation which is based not upon intellectual pride or the desire to supplant one system with another; instead, what is paramount for both moralists is the honest and charitable purpose of arming man's reason against the alluring blandishments of evil and of sweeping error from his pathway to virtue. Samuel Johnson, in following the Baconian principles exemplified in the

---

<sup>135</sup>Works, III, 24-25.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

Coulers, reveals a comparable awareness of the need to safeguard the understanding from the pervasive influence of fallacious reasoning; in making an important application of these principles in the undercutting of some of the most popular and most dominant myths of his society, he reveals once again, as in the case of the study of the disturbed mind, that he is tuned-in to the same range and order of temporal moralistic priorities as was Francis Bacon.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

Samuel Johnson, it must be remembered, was a Christian humanist. As such, he represents the complex amalgam of Christian and Classical tradition, spanning over two thousand years of Western history, together with the accretions superimposed upon this ancient heritage by the secular revolution in thought occasioned by the advances of the physical sciences. When he speaks of reason in the domain of ethics he is speaking from his own humanist tradition of the right reason which recognizes the unchanging and the universal in human nature and treats of what is morally practical, given man's freedom of will; on the other hand, when he speaks of reason in the domain of science, he uses the term in its discursive sense, conceding the propriety, and even the necessity, of its application to the speculative and to the factual. The boundaries of these respective domains, as clearly distinguishable as black from white to Johnson and to his contemporaries, have become blurred with the passage of time and have merged into what is often a grey area of ambiguity for the modern reader. As a consequence, it has been all too easy to read ambivalence into Johnson's moral attitude where, in fact, none exists. In speaking with approval of many of the concepts of the new rationalism variously propounded by Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke, Johnson has reference to the standards appropriate to this field, and these he applies with a wide latitude;

conversely, when his reference is to the ethical standards which represent the fusion of Christian revelation and right reason, he applies these standards rigorously, admitting no variables and permitting no exceptions.

Upon those occasions when the revolutionary thrust of speculative reason encroaches too boldly upon the province of this latter ethical tradition, Johnson rouses himself to do battle in its defense. It is a battle which, unfortunately, given the circumstances of his age and the waning force of this tradition, places Johnson in the position of fighting what is often a lonely and desperate rearguard action.

One example of his spontaneous reaction to whatever threatens his own ethical standard I have previously illustrated, that is: his uncompromising rejection of the then fashionable cult of the "sentimental"--a term, incidentally, which he refused to dignify by any explication in the Dictionary. It was not that Johnson could not feel sympathy with what was genuinely humanitarian in the contemporary worship of "feeling"; rather, what drew the Johnsonian ire was the attempt to displace the traditional ethical principle of Christian charity, as enjoined by the authority of scripture and endorsed by right reason, with an ethical principle based solely upon speculative reason and having for its support nothing more substantial than the vagaries of mutable feeling.

Here, as elsewhere, Johnson has applied only one

touchstone to the principles of moral philosophy: those principles which accord positively with his own ethical standards have his implicit endorsement; those which register negatively are rejected out of hand and attacked as representing error. However, there remains for him yet a third area of what could be called neutral ground: neither positive nor negative, and herein the moral philosopher may be as eclectic as he wishes and, like Bacon's bee, gather his nectar where he may.

What appears to be a growing awareness of Johnson's importance as a moralist has prompted some recent scholarly investigations into the influences which have shaped his moral philosophy. However, most of these investigations, rather than following the main line of Johnson's moralistic thought, appear to have been shunted off and diverted into the side-track of the above-mentioned "neutral" ground. Does Johnson follow Cumberland into Utilitarianism? Does he follow Hobbes in his politics? The questions are valid enough; nevertheless, they concern issues which are peripheral in relation to Johnson's central considerations as a moralist, and their possible answers bring us little closer to an understanding of the essential Johnson.

No closet philosopher, Samuel Johnson saw life as a grim struggle dominated by the haunting fear of retribution, and with the great moral issues pounding incessantly at man's door requiring answers. As one of the last great representatives

of the Christian-humanist tradition he harks back to an earlier age, to the seventeenth century, and to the figure of Francis Bacon, a man bred in the same ethical tradition, respecting the same Christian principles, and having the same practical concern for man's advancement.

In exploring this relationship between the Augustan Johnson and the Jacobean Lord Chancellor, I have been compelled by the wide scope of the subject to confine myself to only the more salient points which establish the connection between the two moralists. From their works further supporting evidence could be educed which would further confirm this relationship; nonetheless, I believe I have sufficiently demonstrated the strong affinities in thought and in attitude which cause both men to bring their practical morality to a central focus upon the same primary task of bringing man into the straight way of truth and virtue.

"Seek the good of other men," says Bacon, and in this simple dictum there is comprehended the ruling principle which governs his own moral philosophy as well as that of Samuel Johnson. In their comprehensive view of what is necessary for man as a free moral agent in a practical world, their consistent application of this principle sets them apart from more traditional philosophers; it also marks their singular and important contribution to English moral philosophy.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alkon, Paul. Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline. Northwestern University Press, 1967.
- Anderson, Fulton H. The Philosophy of Francis Bacon. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- Atkinson, A. D. "Dr. Johnson's Prose Reading." N&Q (1953), Feb., 60-63; March, 107-10; May, 206-10; July, 228-93; Aug., 344-46.
- Bacon, Francis. The Works of Francis Bacon, eds. J Spedding, R. L. Ellis, D. D. Heath. 7 vols. London: Longman & Co., 1870.
- Balderston, Katherine C. "Johnson's Vile Melancholy," Age of Johnson Essays Presented to Chauncey Brewster Tinker. New Haven: 1949.
- Bate, Walter J. The Achievement of Samuel Johnson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_. From Classic to Romantic. New York: Harper and Row, 1946.
- Boswell, James. The Life of Samuel Johnson (including Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales), ed. George Birkbeck Hill; rev. L. F. Powell. 6 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934.
- Bronson, Bertrand H. Johnson Agonistes and Other Essays. Cambridge: University Press, 1946.
- Brown, Stuart Jerry. "Dr. Johnson and the Old Order," Samuel Johnson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Donald J. Greene. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1965.
- Craig, Hardin. The Enchanted Glass: The Elizabethan Mind in Literature. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950.



- Crane, Ronald S. "The Relation of Bacon's Essays to his Program for the Advancement of Learning," Essential Articles for the Study of Francis Bacon, ed. Brian Vickers. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1968.
- Crowther, James G. Francis Bacon: The First Statesman of Science. London: The Cresset Press, 1960.
- Evans, Bergen. The Psychiatry of Robert Burton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1944.
- Farrington, Benjamin. The Philosophy of Francis Bacon. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964.
- Freed, Lewis M. "The Sources of Johnson's Dictionary." Diss., Cornell University, 1939.
- Freud, Sigmund. Complete Psychological Works, General Ed. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953.
- Grange, Kathleen M. "Dr. Samuel Johnson's Account of a Schizophrenic Illness in Rasselas (1759)," Medical History, VI (1962), 162-68.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Samuel Johnson's Account of Certain Psychoanalytic Concepts," Samuel Johnson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Donald J. Greene. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1965.
- Greene, Donald J. The Politics of Samuel Johnson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.
- Haight, Gordon S. "Johnson's Copy of Bacon's Works." Yale University Library Gazette, VI (1932), 67-73.
- Hagstrum, Jean H. "Nature of Dr. Johnson's Rationalism." JELH, XVIII (1950), 191-205.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1952.
- Hovey, Richard B. "Dr. Samuel Johnson, Psychiatrist." MLQ, XV (Dec. 1954), 321-35.
- James, David G. The Dream of Learning. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951.

- Jenyns, Soame. A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil. London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757.
- Johnson, Samuel. The Lives of the English Poets, ed. George Birkbeck Hill. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Selections from Samuel Johnson, ed. R. W. Chapman. London: Oxford University Press, 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Works of Samuel Johnson. 16 vols. Troy, New York: Pafraets Book Co., 1908.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, General Ed. Allen T. Hazen; associate Ed. John H. Middendorf. New Haven: Yale University Press. Vol. I, Diaries, Prayers, Annals, ed. E. L. McAdam Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde (1958). Vol. II, The Idler and The Adventurer, eds. W. J. Bate, J. M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell (1963). Vols. III, IV, V, The Rambler, eds. W. J. Bate, Albrecht B. Strauss (1969). Vol. VI The Poems, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne (1964). Vols. VII, VIII, Johnson on Shakespeare, eds. Arthur Sherbo and B. H. Bronson (1968).
- Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. George Birkbeck Hill. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897.
- Jones, Richard Foster. Ancients and Moderns: A Study of the Rise of the Scientific Movement in Seventeenth-Century England. St. Louis: Washington University Studies, 1961.
- Jonson, Ben. Timber or Discoveries, ed. F. E. Schelling. Boston: 1892.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. Samuel Johnson. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1945.
- Locke, John. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser. 2 vols. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959.
- Lovejoy, Arthur. The Great Chain of Being. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957.
- McAdam, Edward Lipincott, Jr. Dr. Johnson and the English Law. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1951.

- Quinlan, Maurice J. Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion.  
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964.
- Righter, Anne. "Francis Bacon," The English Mind, eds.  
Hugh Sykes Davies, George Watson. Cambridge: University  
Press, 1964.
- Sachs, Arie. Passionate Intelligence: Imagination and  
Reason in the Work of Samuel Johnson. Baltimore: Johns  
Hopkins Press, 1967.
- Shackleton, Robert. "Johnson and the Enlightenment,"  
Johnson, Boswell and Their Circle, Essays Presented to  
Lawrence Fitzroy Powell. Oxford: Clarendon Press,  
1965.
- Singer, Charles. "Bacon, Francis." Encyclopaedia Britannica,  
1943 ed., II, 883-87.
- Swift, Jonathan. A Tale of a Tub and The Battle of the Books,  
eds. A. C. Guthkelch, D. Nichol Smith. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press, 1958.
- Toulmin, Stephen Edelston. An Examination of the Place of  
Reason in Ethics. Cambridge: University Press, 1958.
- Tracy, Clarence R. "Democritus Arise! A Study of Dr.  
Johnson's Humor." Yale Review, XXXIX (1949), 303-10.
- Voitle, Robert. Samuel Johnson the Moralist. Cambridge:  
Harvard University Press, 1961.
- Wallace, Karl R. Francis Bacon on the Nature of Man. London:  
University of Illinois Press, 1967.
- Watkins, Walter B. C. Johnson and English Poetry Before 1660.  
Princeton: University Press, 1936.
- Watt, Ian. "Dr. Johnson and the Literature of Experience,"  
Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba. Cairo: Oxford  
University Press, 1962.
- White, Howard B. Peace Among the Willows. The Hague:  
Martinus Nijhoff, 1968.
- Whitley, Alvin. "The Comedy of Rasselas." ELH, XXIII  
(March, 1956), 48-70.

Willey, Basil. The English Moralists. London: Chatto & Windus, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Seventeenth Century Background. New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1953.

Wilson, F. P. Elizabethan and Jacobean. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945.

Wimsatt, William K. Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the "Rambler" and "Dictionary" of Samuel Johnson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948.