

The Reformist Ideas of Samuel Johnson

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By

Stefka Ritchie

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A sketch of Samuel Johnson, after Joshua Reynolds (circa 1769).

By Svetlan Stefanov (2009) (<http://www.photo4art.com>).

CONTENTS

Abstract	viii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Chronology: Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)	xi
Abbreviations	xiv
Introduction	1
Samuel Johnson: A Promoter of Social Improvement	
Chapter One	38
Samuel Johnson's Social Morality	
Chapter Two	73
Johnson on the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Bread Crises and Agriculture	
Chapter Three	105
Johnson and the 'Immoral' Poor: Destitute Girls and Fallen Women	
Chapter Four	144
Johnson on Debt and Capital Punishment	
Chapter Five	187
Johnson on the Social Role of Architecture and Bridge Building	
Chapter Six	217
Johnson's Tour of the Highlands: A Case Study in Social Morality	
Conclusion	244
An Overview of this Study	
Bibliography	266

ABSTRACT

This book explores what remains an under-studied aspect of Samuel Johnson's profile as a person and writer – his attitude to social improvement. Confronting past and current critical opinion and adhering closely to Johnson's various writings, the book aims to establish the reasons for the failure to identify Johnson's relationship to social concerns during his lifetime.

The book also considers the influence of particular moral philosophies on Johnson's approach to social improvement, such as those of Hugo Grotius, Richard Cumberland, Francis Bacon and John Locke. A range of sources include Johnson's essays in the *Rambler*, *Idler* and *Adventurer*, his various reviews in the *Literary Magazine* and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, his *Diary* of his travels in the Midlands and the Tour of the Highlands with Boswell, as well as various texts he wrote for others who were also concerned with social improvement. When Johnson protests against the institutions of his day he seeks to alleviate a tangible evil, such as the wretchedness of prostitutes, the agonies of imprisoned debtors and the destitution suffered by their families and the terrors of those condemned to death, often for some trivial offence. The profiles of Robert Dossie, William Chambers and John Gwynn together with those of Saunders Welch and William Dodd are discussed in the context of their interests in agriculture, architecture and the law, respectively. Placing those eighteenth-century figures at the centre of a historical enquiry furnishes a richer dimension to the analysis of Johnson's mode of thinking which allows us to respond to his works in a multi-faceted way. The interpretive framework of the book is cross-disciplinary and applies perspectives from social and cultural history, legal history, architectural history and, of course, English literature. This allows Johnson's writings to be read against the peculiarities of their historical milieu and reveal Johnson in a new light – as an advocate of social improvement for human betterment.

PREFACE

Since poverty is punished among us as a crime, it ought at least to be treated with the same lenity as other crimes; the offender ought not to languish, at the will of him whom he has offended, but to be allowed some appeal to the justice of his country.¹

My own interest in the subject of Samuel Johnson and social improvement goes back to 2002 when I completed my MPhil thesis titled ‘Samuel Johnson in an Age of Science’.² I found a scarcity of scholarly literary research exploring Johnson’s keen interest in social improvement. It was also apparent that in order to appreciate the skilful way in which pertinent issues were woven into the texture of his writings there was the need to analyse them against the historical milieu of Johnson’s times. This meant that to break new ground any related research study had to be multi-disciplinary. A step in the right direction was my small contribution on Dr Johnson and the Midlands to the Revolutionary Players website which introduced me to Dr Malcom Dick, who was the Project Manager. Dr Dick supported my proposed research topic and expressed a wish to supervise any potential PhD research studies on Samuel Johnson and social improvement.³ The rest is history.

¹ Samuel Johnson, *Idler* 22, Vol. II, p. 70.

² Stefka Ritchie, ‘Samuel Johnson in an Age of Science’, (Unpublished MPhil thesis, University of Central England, Birmingham, UK, 2002).

³ Stefka Ritchie, ‘The occurrences of common life: Samuel Johnson, Practical Science and Industry in the Midlands’ [online]. Available on: <http://www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk>. [Accessed on 10 July 2013].

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CHRONOLOGY: SAMUEL JOHNSON (1709-1784)

Main dates specifically related to this book:

- 1709** Samuel Johnson was born on 18 September 1709 in Lichfield. His father Michael, was a bookseller.
- 1728** A year in Pembroke College, Oxford but had to leave for financial reasons.
- 1735** Married Elizabeth Porter (Tetty). He was 25 and she 46.
- 1737** Arrived in London with former pupil David Garrick.
- 1738** Started writing for Edward Cave in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Wrote the poem *London*.
- 1739** 'Life of Dr Hermann Boerhaave' in the *Gentleman's Magazine*
- 1740s** The *Ivy Lane Club* founded. Members met in the King's Head near St Paul's cathedral.
- 1741** *Debates in the Senate of Lilliput* (through 1744) for the *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- 1744** 'The Life of Mr Savage' in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- 1746** Signed the contract for his *Dictionary of the English Language*.
- 1749** The poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. The *Letter on Fireworks*.
- 1750** The *Rambler* essays (through 1752).
- 1752** Death of his wife (Tetty).
- 1753** Contributed to the *Adventurer* (through 1754). Took Frank Barber into his care.

- 1754** ‘*The Life of Cave*’ in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*.
- 1755** *Dictionary of the English Language* published. Became a member of the Society of Arts (through 1760).
- 1756** Started editing the *Literary Magazine* (through 1758).
- 1756** Preface to Richard Rolt’s *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*.
- 1757** Reviewed Soame Jenyn’s *An Enquiry into the Origin of Evil* in the *Literary Magazine*.
- 1758** Began publishing the *Idler essays* (through 1760).
- 1759** Wrote *Rasselas* and Introduction to *The World Displayed*.
- 1762** Started receiving an annual pension of three hundred pounds.
- 1763** Met James Boswell.
- 1764** The *Literary Club* founded. Members met initially in the Turk’s Head.
- 1765** Met Henry and Hester Thrale. *The Works of William Shakespeare* published.
- 1765** Received an honorary LL.D. from Trinity College in Dublin.
- 1766** Worked on the Venerian law lectures with Robert Chambers.
- 1770** *The False Alarm*.
- 1771** *Thoughts on Falkland’s Islands*.
- 1773** Travelled with Boswell to the Hebrides.
- 1774** Travelled with the Thrales to North Wales and the Midlands.
- 1775** *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* published. A trip to France with the Thrales. Wrote *Taxation, no Tyranny*.
- 1775** Received an honorary LL.D. from Oxford.
- 1777** Began *Lives of the Poets*. Wrote papers/letters in defence of William Dodd.

- 1779** Began publishing *The Lives of the Poets (Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets)*.
- 1781** Finished publishing *The Lives*.
- 1783** The *Essex Club* was founded.
- 1784** 13 December: Death of Samuel Johnson.

ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviated forms given here will be used for the relevant works of Samuel Johnson and for other frequently used primary and secondary literary sources.

Samuel Johnson's Works

1. The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson

General editor: John Middendorf (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958-).

<i>Diaries</i>	vol. i <i>Diaries, Prayers, and Annals</i> , ed. E L McAdam, with Donald and Mary Hyde (1958).
<i>Idler</i>	vol. ii <i>The Idler</i> and <i>The Adventurer</i> , ed. W J Bate,
<i>Adventurer</i>	John M Bullitt, and L F Powell (1963).
<i>Rambler</i>	vol.iii-v <i>The Rambler</i> , ed. W J Bate and Albrecht B Strauss, 3 vols. (1969)
<i>Poems</i>	vol. vi <i>Poems</i> , ed. E L McAdam Jr with George Milne (1964).
<i>Shakespeare</i>	vols vii-viii <i>Johnson on Shakespeare</i> , ed. Arthur Sherbo, Introduction by Bertrand H Bronson (1968).
<i>A Journey</i>	vol. ix <i>A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland</i> , ed. Mary Lascelles (1971).
<i>Sermons</i>	vol. xiv <i>Sermons</i> , ed. Jean H Hagstrum and James Gray (1978).
<i>A Voyage</i>	vol. xv <i>A Voyage to Abyssinia</i> , ed. Joel J Gold (1985)
<i>Rasselas</i>	vol. xvi 'The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia' in <i>Rasselas and Other Tales</i> , ed. Gwin J Kolb (1990).

- The Vision* vol. xvi ‘The Vision of Theodore, the Hermit of Teneriffe, Found in his Cell, in *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J Kolb (1990).
- Lives* vol. xxi-xxiii *Lives of the Poets*, ed. John H Middendorf (2010).

2. Other Works by Samuel Johnson

- The Dictionary* (1755) *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols (1755). First Folio Edition.
- The Dictionary* (1773) *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols (1773). Fourth edition.

All quotations from both editions are taken from the CD-ROM edition of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Anne McDermott (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

- Lives* ed. Hill *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G B Hill, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905).
- Letters* ed. Chapman *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, with Mrs Thrale’s Genuine Letters to Him*, ed. R W Chapman, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).
- Letters* ed. Redford *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

3. Other Primary Johnsonian Sources

- Life* James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ed. G B Hill, Rev. L F Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934; rept. 1971).
- Tour* Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to The Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*, LLD, ed. R W Chapman (Oxford: OUP, 1934).
- Works* *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 11 vols (Oxford: Talboys and Wheeler; London: W. Pickering, 1825).

4. Other Abbreviations

Bull. Hist. Med. *Bulletin of The History of Medicine*

CUP Cambridge University Press

DNB *Dictionary of National Biography*

ECS *Eighteenth Century Studies*

ELH *English Literary History*

ELS *English Literary Studies*

RSA Jnl *Journal of the Royal Society*

N & Q *Notes and Queries*

OUP Oxford University Press

ODNB *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

RES *Review of English Studies*

INTRODUCTION

SAMUEL JOHNSON: A PROMOTER OF SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT

This book argues that Samuel Johnson engaged with public issues and was often a driving force in the initiation of charitable deeds by his writings, on the basis of his social morality. In this way, his reflections on poverty that are followed by an appeal for charitable action from those more fortunate, acquire a more pointed social dimension.

In *Sermon* 1, after stating that the family of mankind is divided and subdivided into particular communities and associations, Johnson concludes that ‘each of these subdivisions produces new dependencies and relations, and every particular relation gives rise to a particular scheme of duties’.¹ It is argued that the presence of abject poverty was unacceptable to him and he saw his primary duty as a writer in awakening a deep sense of moral responsibility amongst his fellow citizens. Critics, however, have been slow to recognize the social threads in Johnson’s thinking and writings.

A literature review will first highlight some of the reasons for this; followed by the aim and methodology of the present study. The selection of sources will then be discussed and finally there will be an outline of the six chapters.

¹ *Sermon* 1, *Sermons*, Vol. XIV, p. 4. The year of writing of the sermon is not certain, but it is believed to be between 1745-51, p. 6. n.5.

1. Critical overview

1.1 In the aftermath of the tercentenary

In 2002, the author of this book completed an MPhil entitled ‘Samuel Johnson in an Age of Science’.² The thesis traced Johnson’s relation to science through his various writings, from his factual reporting and book reviewing in literary journals, to the compiling of the *Dictionary*, to his essays, prefaces and dedications. The sources provided evidence of Johnson’s innovative scientific thought, which combined essential elements of Bacon’s experimental philosophy and Newton’s concepts of physical reality. The conclusion reached was that to gain a deeper understanding of Johnson’s thinking, we need to be aware of Bacon’s and Newton’s models of thinking and their philosophies must be studied not for any definite answers but for the questions they pose. It confirmed that a broader critical outlook, more diverse and multi-disciplinary, would allow us to explore understudied avenues so that we may appreciate better Johnson’s thought.

Most recent biographies of Johnson show that viewpoints remain fragmented and predominantly psychoanalytical; this prevents scholarly research from constructing a broad critical framework that takes into account the peculiarities of Johnson’s time which was driven by the idea of improvement and a sharpened interest in the rights and responsibilities of the individual to society.³

Two new biographies marked Samuel Johnson’s 300th birthday in 2009, Peter Martin’s *Samuel Johnson: A Biography* and *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle* by Jeffrey Meyers.⁴ They brought to the fore Johnson’s opposition to slavery, encouragement of women writers and protection of animals, all familiar issues to the twenty-first century reader. Martin and Meyers mentioned Johnson’s Jacobite sympathies and his attacks on republicanism and religious dissent. What emerged was a sympathetically constructed image of Johnson - a writer of humble origin, who was often

² Stefka Ritchie, ‘Samuel Johnson in an Age of Science’ (Unpublished MPhil Thesis, University of Central England, Birmingham, UK, 2002).

³ See Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial society 1722-1783*, first publ. 1989 (Oxford: OUP, 1998).

⁴ Peter Martin, *Samuel Johnson: A Biography* (Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Jeffrey Meyers, *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

overwhelmed by insomnia and guilt and plagued by a variety of medical conditions such as flatulence, rheumatism, asthma, palsy, dropsy and gout. The biographers also mentioned that Johnson's writings were not the outpourings of a solitary genius but those of an author keen to engage with social issues. However, by 'social issues' they meant that in order to escape financial hardship, Johnson turned to whatever genre would sell, as verse satires, parliamentary reports, political and periodical essays, sermons and biographies, compilations, abridgments, translations and even a library catalogue. The list is impressive and its variety highlights the diversity of Johnson's interests and his ability to adapt his literary style accordingly – from brief journalistic reporting and attention to factual detail to the use of imaginative pictorial imagery in the allegories. Martin and Meyers did note the social dimension of Johnson's writings; namely, that his ultimate goal was to engage with the living world and expose the ills of society – such as the acute poverty and the unfair treatment of debtors and prostitutes as part of the underclass of mid-eighteenth-century society.

Moreover, as Leah Price observed, eager to bring Johnson closer to today's reader through his private letters and diaries, Martin and Meyers gave us 'a post-Freudian individual whose mature successes are preceded by loneliness and overshadowed by guilt'. Martin's book was hailed as 'a convincing psychological study, and Meyers' as 'a lively group portrait of Johnson's friends'.⁵ Finding nothing new to what had already been said, Deborah Friedell was more critical of the two biographies and doubts whether Martin and Meyers could change or improve our understanding of Johnson's life. Friedell concluded that 'until accounts of all other lives have been exhausted, or until truly interesting new facts or judgments emerge, the existing biographies of Samuel Johnson should be considered sufficient'.⁶ The two biographies are imbued with predominantly psychoanalytical traits and do not allow for new findings to come to light nor existing material to be freshly analysed from a different critical perspective that seeks to place Johnson in the historical milieu to which he belongs.

⁵ Leah Price, Sunday Book Review: Biographies of Samuel Johnson by Peter Martin and Jeffery Meyers [online], January 30, 2009. Available on: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/01/books/review/Price-t.html>. [Accessed on: 7 December 2010].

⁶ Deborah Friedell, 'Review, *Anatomy of Melancholy: Samuel Johnson: A Biography* by Peter Martin and *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle* by Jeffery Meyers' [online]. Available on: <http://www.tnr.com/book/review/anatomy-melancholy>. [Accessed on: 7 December 2010].

David Nokes's was the latest commemorative biography of Johnson which also attracted the attention of a number of critics.⁷ Kathryn Hughes, for example, ended her positive review of the book by saying that Nokes 'does an admirable job of refusing to get swept along by any particular pre-existing version, in the process rescuing Johnson from his usual role as carnival savant and restoring him instead to his full humanity'.⁸ What Hughes admired most was Nokes's ability to recreate Johnson's 'richly conflicted unconscious life, full of frailty, shame, desire and frustration' which she found the best amongst other publications that came out to mark the tri-centenary of Johnson's birth. According to Hughes, if the *Rambler* essays were started as a cash cow, those in the *Idler* were thin and hasty. That the focus of Nokes's biography was on specific personal moments in the life of Johnson was confirmed by John Carey who concluded his review in the *Times* by saying that Johnson emerged from Nokes's scholarly study 'as a wholly good man convinced, at some profound level, that he was wholly worthless'.⁹ Similarly, Christopher Howse revelled in the described madness and melancholy and praised Nokes's 'outstanding' and 'lifelike biography' concluding that 'for all his fears, guilt, bombast and prose moralising, Johnson was a lovable man'.¹⁰ Along the same lines, Freya Johnston found Johnson's works even more elusive; thus, less attractive to the contemporary reader.¹¹ On the whole, the critics seemed to be concentrating more on his personality than on his writings.

⁷ David Nokes, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

⁸ Kathryn Hughes, 'Review, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* by David Nokes. A new biography brings a fresh perspective to the story' [online], *The Guardian*, Saturday 3 October 2009. Available on: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/oct/03/samuel-johnson-david-nokes-review>. [Accessed on: 7 December 2010].

⁹ John Carey, 'Review, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* by David Nokes' [online], *The Sunday Times*, 13 October 2009. Available on: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article6827373.ece. [Accessed on: 7 December 2010].

¹⁰ Christopher Howse, 'Review, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* by David Nokes', *The Telegraph* [online]. Available on: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/6202244/Samuel-Johnson-by-David-Nokes-review.html>. [Accessed on: 7 December 2010].

¹¹ On this see Freya Johnston, 'Review. *Samuel Johnson: A Life* by David Nokes', *Literary Review* [online]. Available on: http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/johnston_09_09.html. [Accessed on: 7 December 2010].

On the contrary, if read against the historical milieu of the mid-eighteenth century, many of Johnson's essays can be viewed as a rich tapestry of life as well as a reflection on significant social problems and proposed solutions. Some of them are often quoted by social and cultural historians of the eighteenth century, and the present study will discuss them in more detail in later chapters. However, the psychoanalytical approach favoured by Martin and Meyers and to a lesser degree by Nokes does not offer a new direction in the critical discourse when discussing Johnson's profile as a person and writer.

Another commemorative book of the tercentenary was *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, a compilation of essays edited by Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood which according to them, aimed to reflect developments in critical thinking since the previous major anniversary, Johnson's 250th birthday. The variety of topics highlighted the eagerness of the contributors to find, in the words of Greg Clingham, 'legitimate and responsible ways of bringing Johnson into conversation with issues – political, cultural, theoretical, and philosophical as well as literary – that engage the modern reader and can contribute profoundly to the way in which modern readers think'.¹² Single facets of existing features of Johnson's life and literary career were selected but not enough attention was given to historical events that came to shape the thinking of Johnson's generation, and that of Johnson himself. Fred Parker, writing about Johnson as a moral philosopher, compared him with Bernard Williams as well as Aristotle and Hume. In a re-evaluation of Johnson's politics of contingency, Clement Hawes made some sweeping generalizations by aligning Johnson with the sceptics rather than with the defenders of the status quo. In her review of the critical compilation, H J Jackson asserted that the collection 'shakes up fusty stereotypes and encourages fresh thinking' and praised its positive contribution to the critical discourse, pitching it at a middle ground 'between introductory and specialist studies', that 'breaks with the tradition of cosy, clubby, introverted Johnsonianism'.¹³ However, since the aim of the collection was to stress the intellectual proximity of Johnson's thinking to our own, the brevity of the essays offered fragmented viewpoints which failed to convey the social spirit of his general outlook.

¹² *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), See Greg Clingham, 'Johnson now and in time', pp. 1-15; p. 4.

¹³ H J Jackson, 'Review, *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*', *TLS* [online] August 26 2009. [Accessed on: 7 December 2010].

Similarly, the eagerness to bring Johnson to the modern reader appears to have guided contributors to the most recent compilation, entitled *Samuel Johnson in Context*.¹⁴ It claimed to offer ‘short, lively and eminently readable chapters’, covering not only Johnson’s life, writings and career but also ‘the literary critical, journalistic, social, political, scientific, artistic, medical, and financial contexts in which his works came into being’.¹⁵ The compilation is a useful reference guide to what has been written on Johnson. But as the chapters are limited in length, they surf the topics rather than offer a detailed analysis and fail to break any new ground.

In summary, the recently published material on Dr Johnson confirms that in a hope to bridge the inevitable gap of three centuries, critics have adopted approaches that will appeal to the twenty-first-century reader. Admittedly, Johnson’s life spans three quarters of the eighteenth century: born on 18 September 1709 in Lichfield, he died on 13 December 1784 in London. It is true that the contemporary reader is separated by more than two hundred and thirty years from Johnson’s death. But apart from the time span, various disciplines were becoming more narrowly defined. The fragmented and strictly specialized was becoming favoured in preference to the wholeness of viewpoint found in the eighteenth-century poetic vision of Pope, Akenside, Addison, Thomson, Savage and Johnson. The nineteenth century marked a distinct change of critical perspective - from grasping the vast which offered a comprehensive overview of the whole to scrutinizing the particular in its minuteness of detail.

It is suggested here that the reason why Johnson’s literary works were losing popularity was not only because they were removed by time from the new readers; but their original framework may have been misinterpreted.

1.2 The birth of the myth of Johnson

As the market was getting saturated with what was claimed to be ‘intimate’ biographical detail on Samuel Johnson after his death, critical appraisal of his character and literary works became sadly over-dependent on it. The survey of primary sources was shunned in favour of the scrutiny of selected material of a secondary nature with a preference for the anecdotal that allowed Macaulay to claim confidently that ‘no human being who has been more than seventy years in the grave is so well known

¹⁴ *Samuel Johnson in Context*, ed. Jack Lynch (Cambridge: CUP, 2012).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

to us'.¹⁶ It is important to acknowledge this major difference. The analysis in this section will confirm that the interpretive approach has since remained fragmented and has tended to overlook Johnson's engagement with social problems and his proposed solutions within their historical context.

Arthur Murphy (1727-1805), who met Johnson and admired him greatly, found the uniqueness of his genius to be contained in the 'fullness' of his mind which embraced the Lockean philosophy that furnished him with 'a round-about view of his subject'. Murphy compared Johnson's inclination to comprehend the whole with the trendy tendency at the time of 'many modern wits' who were fired with 'the ambition of shining in paradox'. He viewed Johnson's ability to encompass the 'whole' as a unique characteristic which together with 'the peculiarities of his style, new combinations, sentences of unusual structure, and words derived from learned languages', made him 'an original thinker'.¹⁷

Besides, Johnson's extensive view expressed itself in his interest in human life. Various observations scattered throughout his writings, be it on coining, the trade of a butcher, the skill of tanning, malting or the various operations in the processing of milk for cheese and butter, illuminate his interest in the practical business of the world. Mrs Thrale noted that 'Dr Johnson's knowledge and esteem for what we call low or coarse life was indeed prodigious'.¹⁸ Conscious of being accused of taking away 'the dignity of the writing' when dwelling on 'diminutive observations' or on what could appear mundane topics, Johnson put across his defence in that 'life consists not of a series of illustrious actions, or elegant enjoyments' as 'the greater part of our lives passes in compliance with necessities, in the performance of small inconveniences, in the procurement of petty pleasures ...'.¹⁹ The statement relates to the necessity of provision of the most basic means of subsistence and has deeply ingrained social

¹⁶ Lord Macaulay, 'Life of Johnson' in *Johnson's Chief Lives* from *Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, edited with preface by Matthew Arnold; first publ. 1881 (New York: Russell & Russell, rept. 1968), pp 1-41; p. 42.

¹⁷ Arthur Murphy, 'An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LLD' in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, Vol. I, pp. 355-488; p. 467. Murphy met Johnson in 1754 when he was working on the *Gray's Inn Journal* and after realising that the article he published was not French but a translation into French of Johnson's *Rambler* 190, he came to apologise, and the two became friends. See Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1977), p. 322.

¹⁸ *Johnsoniana*, p. 64.

¹⁹ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands*, Vol. IX, pp. 18-20.

connotations. It is a stand akin to the mid-eighteenth-century thinking that was influenced by the ideas of natural law philosophers such as Hugo Grotius, Richard Cumberland and John Locke amongst others. It is also rooted in Johnson's moral outlook which will be discussed in the book.

Ignoring the evidence of Johnson's diverse interests, Macaulay further claimed that

His mind [Johnson's] resembled those creepers which other botanists call parasites and which can subsist only by clinging round the stems and inhibiting the juices of stronger plants. He must have fastened himself on somebody.²⁰

Macaulay could not be further from the truth, as it is known that Johnson helped many in their writings, and never wanted an acknowledgement for it, but the force of his literary pen is unmistakable.²¹ In relation to this, the present study evaluates the profiles of Robert Dossie, Robert Chambers, William Chambers and John Gwynn together with those of Saunders Welch and William Dodd in the context of their interests in agriculture, the law and architecture in the advancement of knowledge and amelioration of life. Some of their written works are examined here as they confirm Johnson's social morality and the benevolent nature of many of his undertakings.

The tendency to evaluate Johnson's works on the basis of fashionably-coined critical notions appears to have travelled into the twentieth century. The psychoanalytical method was employed by Walter Jackson Bate in his award-winning biography of Samuel Johnson.²² In his Preface, Bate recognized the difficulty faced by the biographer 'created by the radical split, which began in the 1930s and 1940s, between literary biography and criticism'.²³ Bate made a valid point that in overemphasizing one genre to

²⁰ Macaulay, p.29.

²¹ On this, see J D Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Treating his published Works from the Beginnings to 1984*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). Fleeman noted Boswell's observation that in collecting Johnson's bibliographical material one had to deal works which were dispersed in 'different literary forms in different kinds of publications, often anonymous, frequently made under the names of others', 'Preface', p.xxii. See also, *Life*, Vol. II, pp. 224-25.

²² Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, first publ. 1977 (London: Chatto & Windus, rept. 1998). The book won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

²³ *Ibid*, p. xx.

the detriment of another, critics limited their vision which was likely to distort their picture of the 'whole'. He warned against the danger of this 'fragmented' approach which by ignoring some externally operating forces that may have played part in the formation of Johnson's outlook, may lead to subjective distortion of data. By bringing 'biography' and 'criticism' closer, Bate imaginatively reconstructed events in Johnson's life, but his chosen critical perspective allowed for the manipulation and blurring of biographical information and the narrowing effects of psychoanalysis overlooked Johnson's interest in the improvement of life and general eradication of acute poverty.

In his review of Bate's book, Frederick Troy suggested that Bate's psychological method was 'based upon Erik Erikson's "paradigm" of human development' and failed to acknowledge the influence of the complex body of externally operating forces. He pointed to the influence of Freudian and other psychoanalytic theories and noted that biographical data, manipulated in a sterile fashion that functions outside of the context of any significant historical indicators, could lead to the creation of a profile that lacked dimensionality.²⁴ Admittedly, Bate's portrayal of Johnson may not have the hostile overtones of Macaulay's image of the writer, but his characterisation becomes more of a revelation of the compulsive nature of neurotic morbidity than an explanation of the peculiar force and intensity of his genius. In choosing the singular critical view of psychoanalysis, Bate omitted important external historical factors that led to changes in the social infrastructure at the time. Thus, he failed to recognize Johnson's response to the ills of society, be it the wretchedness of servitude, the agonies of the imprisoned debtor and the destitution suffered by his family, or the terrors of those condemned to death, often for some trivial offence. The skilful ways in which Johnson promoted social issues in his works remained unnoticed by Bate.²⁵

In the latter part of the twentieth century, attempts were made to adopt a broader approach that allowed a more complex survey of Johnson's works

²⁴ Frederick S Troy, 'Samuel Johnson in Modern Perspective' in *Biography & Criticism* (*The Massachusetts Review*, 1978), pp. 517-41; p. 520.

²⁵ Another example of the application of the psychoanalytical approach is John Wiltshire, *Samuel Johnson in the Medical World. The Doctor and the Patient* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991). Wiltshire's book is imbued with psychoanalytical overtones in which he surveys a large part of Johnson's works and depicts Johnson as a self-absorbed doctor of his body and mind.

against the historical peculiarities of the intellectual and spiritual climate of the eighteenth century.

In his book, *Samuel Johnson's Attitude to the Arts* of 1989, Morris Brownell, for example, tried to reverse the settled consensus of Johnson's generally negative view of the arts.²⁶ Brownell paid particular tribute to the establishment of the Royal Academy in 1768, the first exhibition of art, and the first English art festival during the Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769 and the Handel Commemoration of 1784. Johnson's close connection with the Royal Academy, his friendly links with Charles Burney, Joshua Reynolds and prominent architects such as William Chambers, Robert Mylne and John Gwynn, for many of whom he wrote or edited their writings that were imbued with the spirit of improvement, were brought to the fore. It was a study in the right direction which could have probed deeper into the existing social indicators in Johnson's works, in his own name or in support of others.

In 1993, Robert DeMaria offered a new dimension in Johnson's intellectual history in *The Life of Samuel Johnson*.²⁷ 'My object in the pages that follow', DeMaria wrote, 'is to tell the story of Johnson's life as a compromise with his highest aspiration from a life of European scholarship and European identity'. His understanding of producing an 'objective biography' was translated into an attempt to 'reinstate Johnson and his works in a European cultural context without introducing, as far as possible' any help from Boswell.²⁸ A valuable contribution to the 'objective' Johnsonian critical debate, the study focused on the under-researched desire of Johnson to emulate 'venerable continental authors'.²⁹

²⁶ Morris R Brownell, *Samuel Johnson's Attitude to the Arts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). See the 'Introduction: "A Bull in the China-shop of Taste"'. Brownell declares his intention to explode anecdotes about Johnson's attitude to music, painting and sculpture, architecture, and landscape in order to refute our misconceptions of them, p. x.

²⁷ Robert DeMaria, *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xiv-xv.

²⁹ See Michael F Suarez's Review, 'Uncommon Reader', *RES*, n.s. 46 (August 1995), pp. 415-17; p. 417. Also in his review of DeMaria's book, Lurcock says: 'DeMaria argues that Johnson "took the intellectual bearings in every subject by reference to a European standard of learning", and that his overreaching ambition was to belong to the Latin world of European scholarship. This thesis genuinely informs the whole book'. A F T Lurcock, *N&Q*, 42:1 (March 1995), pp. 98-99; p. 99.

Familiarity with the Renaissance humanistic thought and neo-Latin poetry allowed DeMaria to explore the subject at length. As his aim was to 'liberate Johnson from England in order to place him in a cultural milieu without national boundaries and equally accessible to all his admirers', the created image of Johnson was 'less narrowly English and more catholic in his sensibilities and aspirations that we have previously realized'.³⁰ But the painted single-faceted picture lacked the richness of Johnson's thought as the empirical methodology of Bacon and Newton's revolutionary ideas of colour and light were deeply embedded in the mid-eighteenth-century psyche and should not be ignored. In *Adventurer* 131, Johnson wrote:

Whoever, after the example of Plutarch, should compare the lives of illustrious men, might set this part of Newton's character to view with great advantage, by opposing it to that of Bacon, perhaps the only man of later ages, who has any pretensions to dispute with him the palm of genius of science.³¹

Johnson never came to write the parallel lives of Bacon and Newton in the fashion of Plutarch's *Lives*, but often recognized their influence upon his own mode of thinking. Thus, grounding in the major concepts of the philosophies of Bacon and Newton allows us to appreciate better the divergence of ideas which engaged his attention. Richard Schwartz's book *Samuel Johnson and the New Science*, still remains the only authority on the subject of Johnson's scientific thought.³² Schwartz pointed to the significance of the Baconian legacy that came to instill in Johnson and his contemporaries a determined dislike of dogma and a desire for benevolent deeds on the road to progress. As the focus of the present study is on Johnson's social outlook, Bacon's views of the altruistic role of the scientist will be given special attention.

³⁰ Robert DeMaria, *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. xv.

³¹ *The Adventurer* 131, vol. II, p. 482.

³² Richard Schwartz, *Samuel Johnson and the New Science* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1971). Critical of the tendency of scholars to scrutinize only favoured aspects of the eighteenth century, thus breaking the coherence of the whole, Schwartz centres his interest primarily on Johnson's positive views of the Baconian scientific tradition, adamant that 'the English tradition of science and scientific ideology—to which the empirical methodology is central' is a fact that was self-evident to Voltaire but failed to be noticed by critics today, for which he provides a wealth of referential evidence, p. 62.

The overview so far confirms that critics have tried to adopt a broader approach to a more complex survey of Johnson's literary works against the peculiarities of the prevailing intellectual and spiritual climate of the times. However, there is still a gap which needs to be filled. In 1984, Donald Greene concluded his evaluation of the body of existing critical material on Johnson written in the first three quarters of the twentieth century, by saying that there had not been a sufficient shift in the prevailing attitude to call the Macaulayan myth dead. To illustrate his point, Greene referred to Mona Wilson's negative opinion of 'much of his [Johnson's] writing' for being 'dead as well as dull'.³³ Greene's statement that 'this grotesque figure' may still be around at the tercentenary of Johnson's death sounds like a reluctant admission of defeat, tinged with sadness. In his view, the distorted image created by Macaulay and perpetuated thereafter could be challenged only by the determined efforts of a young scholar who would be prepared to dedicate a 'life time's work' to the successful rehabilitation of Johnson, the man and the writer. His appeal was passionate and sincere: 'Yet I cannot help feeling that, arduous as the task might be, such study of Johnson's writing and thought would in the end be quite as rewarding as the study of Dostoevsky or Joyce'.³⁴ Greene stressed that an overview of Johnson's writings could not be accomplished without a competent understanding of the historical and intellectual milieu in which he lived and worked.³⁵

This book takes up Greene's premise that ideas must not be discussed in a historical vacuum. It is argued that the singularity of treatment of narrowly selected areas is one of the reasons preventing scholarship today from recognizing Johnson's engagement with issues of a social nature in historical context. This is the focus of this study.

³³ Mona Wilson writes: 'No one should even read a selection from his [Johnson's] writings, who is not already familiar with the man. Boswell must come first ... He is often dull; unless you know him, much of his writing is dead as well as dull'. See Mona Wilson, 'Introduction' to *Johnson, Poetry and Prose* (London, 1950, Cambridge: Mass., 1951), p. 5; and quoted by Donald Greene in 'The Future of Johnsonian Biography', p. 45. Wilson goes further on to say that, 'It would be a wary if not impossible task to read the whole of Johnson's writings without the support of a personal sympathy ... You must hear the slow deliberate utterance and the puffing by which it is punctuated', p. 45.

³⁴ See Donald Greene's writings on the subject in 'Augustinianism and Empiricism: A Note on Eighteenth-Century English Intellectual History', *ELS*, vol. I (Fall 1967), pp. 33-68 and *The Age of Exuberance: Background to Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (New York, 1970), pp. 89-126.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

2. Some factors considered

2.1 The importance of the historical perspective

Roy Porter observed that ‘big ideas must be contextualised in terms of broader transformations in casts of mind, habits of thinking and shades of sensibility’.³⁶ Along the same lines, Samuel Johnson said, ‘Every man’s performance to be rightly estimated, must be compared with the state of the age in which he lived, and with his own particular circumstances’.³⁷ Johnson’s words underline the importance he placed upon man’s achievements measured against the historical milieu. This section outlines the significance of social indicators when reviewing Johnson’s writings.

Johnson’s life encompasses three quarters of the eighteenth century, which is often referred to as the ‘Age of Johnson’.³⁸ A year before he died Johnson said to Sir William Scott, ‘The age is running mad after innovation; all the business of the world is to be done in a new way’.³⁹ Though the observation was made in response to the changed practice of hanging in Tyburn prison which in Johnson’s opinion, ‘itself is not safe from the fury of innovation’, it captured the accelerating spirit of improvement. Thirty-six years Johnson’s junior, of humble origin, Sir William became a prominent jurist, was a member of Johnson’s Literary Club founded in 1764 and would have shared Johnson’s interest in public welfare.⁴⁰ The Literary Club was a private club with no recorded minutes, but there were many other newly-founded clubs and societies which were imbued with philanthropic spirit and involved in various aspects of community life. Peter Clark points to the great number of clubs and

³⁶ Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World* (New York and London: W W Norton, 2000), p. 13.

³⁷ Samuel Johnson, ‘Preface to Shakespeare’ (1765), Vol. VII, p. 81.

³⁸ *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, publ. by AMS Press Ins. covers aspects of literature, history and culture of the period of Samuel Johnson’s literary career and has become the leading journal for Johnsonian studies. The Journal was first published in 1987 under the editorship of Paul Korshin and since his death in 2004, it has been edited by Jack Lynch.

³⁹ *Life*, Vol. IV, p. 188.

⁴⁰ See Boswell’s recollection of dining with Johnson at ‘Mr Scott (now Sir William Scott, his Majesty’s Advocate General) on 10 April 1778, *Life*, Vol. III, pp. 261–262. For more on the life and work of Sir William Scott (1745–1836), an English judge and jurist, see R A Melikan, ‘Scott, William, Baron Stowell (1745–1836)’, *ODNB* (OUP, 2004) [online ed. Jan 2008]. Available on: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24935>. [Accessed on: 6 July 2013].

societies which swept the country that ranged from political, religious and scientific societies to artistic and literary clubs were and recruited widely from the urban classes.⁴¹ Similarly, Donna T Andrew refers to the significance of subscription associations which had an extensive membership nationally and regionally with the purpose of the amelioration of poverty and hunger.⁴²

In light of this, the book draws attention to the credo for social progress of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce and Johnson's membership of it almost from its foundation in 1755. Notably, sources documenting the history of the Society often mention Johnson's membership and his participation in its workings, but not enough critical attention has been given to it. In 1985, in a Symposium commemorating Johnson's association with the Society, John Abbott spoke of 'the service and dedication of a talented cross-section of British society' who 'actively participated in shaping the contours of the world we now inhabit'. Abbott also remarked upon the meagre mention of Johnson's connection with the Society by Boswell and his unwillingness to determine the exact extent of it. This study argues that an analysis of it is essential when discussing Johnson's social morality and uses Abbott's findings from the early activities of the Society as they deal with Johnson's involvement from his election on 1 December 1756, proposed by James 'Athenian' Stuart, to 31 March 1762, when he proposed Mr Edmund Allen, printer, Bolt Court, Fleet Street, for membership.⁴³

This book focuses also on the pioneering ideas of a social nature which Johnson promoted in his periodical essays. Miles Ogborn, an influential human geographer, suggested that the mid-eighteenth century ideas of charity, pity and sympathy, were put forward in the *Rambler* as early as 1751 as a solution to the problem of prostitution, and that coincided with the beginning of the debate over this issue that led to the Magdalen's foundation in 1758.⁴⁴ Ogborn did not mention Johnson's name, but

⁴¹ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800. The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

⁴² D T Andrew, *Philanthropy and Public London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (NJ: Princeton, 1989), p. 134.

⁴³ John Abbott, 'Johnson's Membership of the Society reconsidered', *RSA Journal* (August 1985), Vol. 133, pp. 618-22; p.618. For Johnson's Society activities see also J Abbott's article 'Dr Johnson and the Society, *RSA Journal*, Parts I, II (CXV) (1967), pp. 395-400, pp. 486-91.

⁴⁴ Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity. London's Geographies 1680-1780* (New York & London: The Guildford Press, 1998), Ch. 2 'The Magdalen Hospital', pp.