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### Samuel Johnson, Scepticism, and Biography

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MARTIN MANER

## Samuel Johnson, Scepticism, and Biography

Distrust is a necessary qualification of a student of history.

(Samuel Johnson, *Works* [1825] 6: 5.)

I

Samuel Johnson has been described both as sceptical and as dogmatic. His writings often seem resoundingly final in their judgments, yet the process of reading Johnson is an exercise in doubt and uncertainty, especially in the biographies, where his rhetoric makes us suspend our judgment as we weigh dialectically opposed versions of the truth. Because he believes that the ultimate moral purpose of biography is the philosophical one of strengthening the reader's judgment, he tries to draw us into the process of sceptically weighing probabilities.

His underlying biographical scepticism derives from a variety of sources, including the "constructive scepticism" of the seventeenth-century Christian apologists, the scientific epistemologies of Locke and Bacon, and the critical scepticism of Pierre Bayle.<sup>1</sup> Johnson's sceptical manner is a form of philosophical dialectic, a way of juxtaposing probabilities and forcing us to choose. By means of it he keeps his inferential procedures visible, as though he wants us to *see* him judging probabilities, testing the limits of biographical inference.

As a genre, biography entails a number of uncertainties. What does it mean to "know" another person? If it is difficult sometimes to understand our own motives, actions, and emotions, how well can we understand those of another person?

In estimating the pain or pleasure of any particular state, every man, indeed, draws his decisions from his own breast, and cannot with cer-

tainty determine, whether other minds are affected by the same causes in the same manner. Yet by this criterion we must be content to judge, because no other can be obtained (*Yale Works* 2: 493).

Johnson characteristically resolves such doubts "commonsensically," by suggesting that there is a degree of certainty appropriate to each sphere in life, and that it is vain to wish for more certainty than experience allows.

When dealing with uncertain testimony, Johnson tends to think along lines laid down by Locke and the constructive sceptics of the seventeenth century, authorities on judging probable evidence. In evaluating testimony, Johnson displays his most consistent scepticism and his most consistent criteria for evaluating biographical truth-claims. Although these criteria are nowhere systematically set forth in Johnson's writings, they can be ascertained by "mapping" Johnson's expressions of doubt and his ways of resolving those doubts. But first it is necessary to understand the complex relationship between Johnson the biographer and Johnson the student of the religious, philosophical, and general scepticism of his era.

Some students of eighteenth-century literature might object to the use of the term "scepticism" in characterizing Johnson's thought, because they associate the term with an inverted dogmatism that denies the possibility of genuine knowledge. Others might object that "scepticism" connotes lack of Christian faith. The connotations of "scepticism" are wrong for Johnson on both counts. But despite Johnson's rejection of the more extreme forms of sceptical doubt, his manner of sifting historical and biographical testimony shows everywhere the influence of constructive scepticism; furthermore, his methods as a biographer were motivated by, and modulated by, his reaction to the philosophical and religious scepticisms of his day.

We should distinguish between several historically interrelated meanings of the word *scepticism*. Most narrowly, the word has come to mean "unbelief with regard to the Christian religion" (*OED*). More broadly, *scepticism* can mean doubt about whether there is a God. More broadly still, *scepticism* can mean the opinion that real knowledge of any kind is or may be unattainable; this is "philosophical scepticism."<sup>2</sup> Finally, *scepticism* in the broadest sense denotes "disposition to doubt or incredulity in general" (*OED*). I follow Phillip Harth in using the term to denote the methodical application of doubt as part of the process of inquiry (Harth 1-31).

As a historical movement, philosophical scepticism influenced Johnson more through its effect upon scientific epistemology and sev-

enteenth-century religious controversy than through the writings of his contemporaries or of earlier continental sceptics. He apparently read the Renaissance sceptics with little sympathy. In the opening lecture of Part II of the Vinerian lectures, for instance, he refers to Montaigne as an “ingenious but whimsical French author” (McAdam 107). Of Johnson’s attitude toward the important sceptics of seventeenth-century France—Naudé, Patin, Marandé, Le Vayer, Gassendi, La Peyrère, Sorbière—we know very little. He read Gassendi’s biography of Peiresc, and he owned Gassendi’s collected works (Boswell 2: 521n; Greene, *Library* 86, 60). Johnson read Glanvill’s *Scep̄sis Scientifica*—he quoted from it in the *Dictionary*—and he certainly knew of Sorbière, if only by way of Sorbière’s preface to Gassendi or Sprat’s *Observations on Sorbière’s Voyage into England*.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than deriving from specific philosophical influences, Johnson’s sceptical patterns of thought were conscious dialectical stratagems which he assimilated from a centuries-long tradition of sceptical argument. Revived in the Renaissance and variously modified in religious, scientific, and philosophical controversies over a period of two hundred years, scepticism in fact influenced Johnson indirectly in so many ways that the lines of influence must be carefully disentangled.

The philosophical scepticism of the ancient world was embodied mainly in the writings of Cicero and Sextus Empiricus. Rediscovered and published in the sixteenth century, the writings of Empiricus immediately played a part in two parallel controversies. In the philosophical-scientific realm, sceptical arguments were instrumental in the evolution of the new science’s empirical epistemology. In the moral-religious realm, sceptical arguments were employed in the Rule of Faith controversy revolving around the uncertainty of a criterion of truth in Christian belief.

Religious apologists, whether Catholic or Protestant, found sceptical arguments useful in support of faith. Since all knowledge is uncertain, they argued, this general uncertainty gives us all the more reason for accepting the best-attested religious truths on faith. The constructive sceptics argued that in a subject as vital as religion, one should stop short of unreasonable doubt. Johnson liked this “commonsensical” way of resolving uncertainty.

The trouble is, a sceptical attack upon the grounds for scepticism merely gives rise to another basis for argument: what criterion distinguishes reasonable from unreasonable doubt? Such an argument about a truth-criterion requires another criterion to solve it, and the Pyrrhonian method of sceptical argument deriving from Sextus Empiricus

refuses to grant such a criterion. This was the logical impasse created by the problem of truth-criteria in the centuries-long Reformation debate over the "Rule of Faith," or criterion of religious knowledge. Luther sceptically questioned Papal authority and proposed a new criterion: what our consciences compel us to believe upon reading scripture is true. In reply, Erasmus gave sceptical reasons for remaining Catholic. Pyrrhonian arguments for and against religious beliefs became standard weapons of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, especially in France, where Pyrrhonism was used to attack the Calvinists' use of "inner persuasion" as the Rule of Faith.

A similar use of scepticism in support of religious belief emerged among the Anglican apologists and English scientists of the seventeenth century, who met the challenge of Pyrrhonism by formulating a commonsensical approach to truth-criteria. Stillingfleet, Chillingworth, and Tillotson are the main exemplars of this line of thought, and they number among the authors Richard Popkin refers to as the "constructive sceptics" of the seventeenth century, the "divines and others of the last century" to whom, John Hawkins said, Johnson "owed his excellence as a writer" (see *Yale Works* 3: xxxiii). Johnson follows their lead in applying sceptical doubt constructively, seeing it as a temporary stage in the process of arriving at probable truth.

William Chillingworth's *The Religion of Protestants* was an early English adaptation of the views expressed by Castellio (*De Arte dubitandi*) and Grotius (*De Veritate religionis christianae*), an author Johnson struggled to read at age ten, who tried to show that it is impossible to attain complete certainty in religion, and that consequently we need to be content with reasonable degrees of probability in religious matters. In the writings of Chillingworth and Tillotson, as well as in those of such apologists for the new science as Wilkins, Glanvill, Boyle, Locke, and Newton, "common sense about every day affairs is made the basis for settlement of perplexities about religion" (Van Leeuwen xiii). The commonsense mitigation of scepticism was based on the idea that "there are several levels of certainty ranging from absolute certainty to mere probability, each determined by a particular kind of evidence, and that an exact proportion must be maintained between evidence and certainty" (Van Leeuwen 14).

Because their central concern was the question of evidences for the Christian faith, and because such key evidences as miracles and prophecies derive from historical testimony, Chillingworth and Tillotson especially tended to concentrate on evaluating degrees of certainty in questions of testimony. Their criteria for evaluating testimony, deriv-

ing from ancient rhetorical canons for evaluating witnesses' reliability (Patey 7), evolved into those of Locke, who enumerated six: the number, integrity, and skill of witnesses, their purpose, the internal and external consistency of the circumstances related, and the presence or absence of contradictory testimony. Locke also shared the tendency of the "constructive sceptics" to apply sceptical and probabilistic reasoning to questions of morality and religion; one of his arguments for toleration is the typically sceptical one that since religious questions are often questions of probability, we should tolerate each other's views. Johnson's familiarity with sceptical patterns of thought certainly owed much to his acquaintance with these seventeenth-century constructive sceptics; in particular, we know that his interest in the question of evidences for the Christian faith "continued to be one of his primary intellectual concerns until the final days of his life" (Walker, "Evidences" 41).

His most famous remarks on the subject of Christian evidences and sceptical doubt occurred in a conversation with Boswell on July 14, 1763:

Talking of those who denied the truth of Christianity, he said, "It is always easy to be on the negative side. If a man were to deny that there is salt upon the table, you could not reduce him to an absurdity. Come, let us try this a little further. I deny that Canada is taken, and I can support my denial by pretty good arguments. The French are a much more numerous people than we; and it is not likely that they would allow us to take it. 'But the ministry have assured us, in all the formality of the Gazette, that it is taken.'—Ay, but these men have still more interest in deceiving us. They don't want that you should think the French have beat them, but that they have beat the French. Now suppose you should go over and find that it is really taken, that would only satisfy yourself; for when you come home we will not believe you. We will say, you have been bribed.—Yet, Sir, notwithstanding all these plausible objections, we have no doubt that Canada is really ours. Such is the weight of common testimony. How much stronger are the evidences of the Christian religion?" (Boswell 1: 428)

Johnson uses sceptical arguments constructively in this famous passage. He refers to sense impressions as a criterion ("salt upon the table") to show that even the most certain of sense impressions may be subjected to unreasonable doubt; he then shifts to a question of testimony, where doubt may more reasonably be entertained; he impugns the number and the integrity of witnesses; and he triumphantly and commonsensically dismisses these grounds for doubt. He argues else-

where that "we have as strong evidence for the miracles . . . as the nature of the thing admits" (Boswell 1: 444–45). In using common sense as a criterion, and in evaluating levels or degrees of probability, Johnson follows in the footsteps of the constructive sceptics. In fact, as Robert G. Walker has pointed out, this argument probably derives from a similar argument put forth by Tillotson in his *The Rule of Faith* (Walker, "Credibility" 254–55). The idea that the degree of assent should be proportioned to the degree of evidence's credibility "was a keystone of seventeenth-century Anglican apologetics" (Walker, "Evidences" 33).

Like many of his contemporaries, Johnson believed that the really essential truths of the Christian religion are clear, understandable, and well attested:

For revealed religion, he said, there was such historical evidence, as, upon any subject not religious, would have left no doubt. Had the facts recorded in the New Testament been mere civil occurrences, no one would have called in question the testimony by which they are established; but the importance annexed to them, amounting to nothing less than the salvation of mankind, raised a cloud in our minds, and created doubts unknown upon any other subject.

. . . .

With regard to evidence, Dr. Johnson observed that we had not such evidence that Caesar died in the Capitol, as that Christ died in the manner related. (*Johnsonian Miscellanies* 2: 384)

Johnson felt that the Christian faith rested upon credible historical evidence; thus he could use sceptical doubt defensively, showing that *excessive* doubts were disproportionate to the weight of testimony.

This common-sense solution to the problem of religious doubt seems to have satisfied Johnson. Whatever his religious uncertainties, they seem to have related more to the question of his own spiritual worth than to the question of faith. Indeed, Johnson regarded extreme scepticism in philosophy and religion as downright pathological; his *Rambler* 95 is a portrait of a sceptic Johnson calls Pertinax, who searches "not after proofs, but objections" (*Yale Works* 4: 146). This habit of radical doubt leads him into psychopathological confusion from which he barely recovers. As Chester Chapin points out, "Johnson considers radical skepticism a mental disease, something quite different from that creative distrust which leads to the discovery of truth" ("Common Sense" 63).

In addition to this constructive scepticism that sought a common-

sensical solution to the problem of the "Rule of Faith," concerning itself particularly with the historical reliability of the "evidences" for faith, there was another sceptical influence upon Johnson. This was the epistemology deriving from Bacon and Locke that sought to resolve the problem of truth-criteria in the physical sciences: if words and ideas are built upon sense data, and if sense data are unreliable, then the language and concepts of science are doubtful, too. Empiricist epistemology had to justify itself against the age-old problem posed by the sceptics: how can we ever know the true inner workings of nature, when perception touches only nature's surfaces?

One answer was Bacon's view of human knowledge, which took into account the "idols" of human language and perception in order "to reconstitute knowledge on a basis of certainty."<sup>4</sup> In epistemology, Pyrrhonism threatened to undermine the claims of the new science by pointing out that since our knowledge of phenomena is derived from potentially deceptive sense data, we can know only the outward manifestations of things, not their inner or essential natures. To Johnson, as to Bacon, the surest refutation of such doubts was the knowledge provided by the new science in its program of "ordered study, diligent observation and experimentation" (Schwartz 70).<sup>5</sup> In Bacon, perhaps, he could see the empiricist's use of sceptical doubt as a means of reaching probable truth, rather than as an evasion or rejection of all knowledge that falls short of certainty.

If Bacon was empiricism's advocate and exemplar, its theorist was Locke. From the constructive sceptics Locke adapted the notion of degrees of assent, correlating them with three levels of knowledge: intuitive knowledge, demonstrative knowledge, and opinion. Intuitive knowledge, in Locke's familiar argument, is based upon the immediate, intuitively perceived congruity of clear and distinct ideas; demonstrative knowledge is based upon linked series of such congruities; and opinion or judgment is based upon ideas whose congruity or incongruity is not immediately apparent. Locke's theory rescues empirical knowledge from the sceptics by assigning to the rational faculty of judgment the task of weighing probabilities where certainties are impossible.

Johnson habitually draws the distinction between demonstrative and probabilistic reasoning; he once commented characteristically that "[t]he next degree of satisfaction to the attainment of certainty is the knowledge that certainty cannot be attained" (McAdam 98). Like John Locke's, Johnson's probabilism served to anchor his view of knowledge between the extremes of scepticism and dogmatism (Trowbridge



4–5), and, like Locke's, his probabilism derived many of its characteristic assumptions from constructive scepticism.

While Locke and the constructive sceptics helped to shape Johnson's style of thinking, an avowed sceptic helped Johnson find his manner of arguing: Pierre Bayle. Johnson's distinctive biographical persona is that of a Christian moralist who uses the tone of a radical sceptic, and this sceptical manner derives from Bayle. Johnson used *A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical* (1734–41), an English work based on Bayle, as a source in the *Lives of the Poets* (Rogers 150), and he told Boswell that "Bayle's Dictionary is a very useful work for those who love the biographical part of literature, which is what I love most" (1: 425). Scattered references to Bayle suggest that it was especially Bayle the biographer and critical historian that Johnson admired and emulated (see Boswell 1: 285 and 5: 287).

Johnson was Baylean, too, in his famous preference for factual genres—a "preference rooted in a respect for the authority of concrete fact and immediate observation" (Edinger 78). In a way, *Idler* 84 is a Baylean defense of historical criticism:

Certainty of knowledge not only excludes mistake, but fortifies veracity. What we collect by conjecture, and by conjecture only can one man judge of another's motives or sentiments, is easily modified by fancy or desire; as objects imperfectly discerned, take forms from the hope or fear of the beholder. But that which is fully known cannot be falsified but with reluctance of understanding, and alarm of conscience. (*Yale Works* 2: 263)

Biography was the perfect vehicle for the Baylean critical project: the establishment of the "fully known" upon the ruins of the falsified.

The biographies originally entitled *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical* are critical in still another, more important sense: Johnson's criticism, like Bayle's, facilitates a direct relationship between the reader's judgment and the text, and thereby it transfers authority from text to critical reader. Criticism in this broad sense, Jean Starobinski argues, defends human judgment against the "risk of disorder" entailed by the Renaissance's massive restoration of history, its "influx of information":

Criticism (particularly as practiced by Pierre Bayle) discovers history not in the narration, but in the very act of situating such historical material as has been verified by the best available resources. The collation of evidence, the rejection of all opinions adopted solely on the guarantee of a so-called trustworthy source, the battle against false conclusions, para-

logisms whose theses are supported only by dogmatic tenets: such are some of the aspects of that extirpation of errors which constitutes the official intention of Bayle's *Dictionary*. (4)

Precisely such extirpation of errors, collation of evidence, rejection of opinions, and evaluation of testimony distinguish Johnson's *Lives* as *critical* biographies. Johnson's historical scepticism—more precisely, his constant attempt to employ that scepticism constructively—puts him in the Enlightenment critical tradition initiated by Bayle, who saw as the purpose of criticism the strengthening of the reader's independent judgment.

Bayle defended the value of historical study by invoking the familiar principle of degrees of assent, arguing that probable conclusions should be valued according to the kind of certitude appropriate to them. He gave as an example of historical truth the sort of commonplace illustration constantly employed by the constructive sceptics: the well-attested truth that Caesar defeated Pompey. Sceptics usually argued that truth based on historical testimony was less certain than demonstrative truth, but Bayle turns this around to argue for the superior credibility of historical fact—"not because . . . [fact] can be employed within the perspective of a broad historical narration based on the ensemble of verified facts, but because the critical act [of ascertaining factual truth] has a value of its own" (Starobinski 5). Bayle and Johnson part company here, since for Bayle "the criticism of factual errors becomes instrumental in a *general criticism*" that ultimately undermines theological discourse (Starobinski 6), while for Johnson critical thought serves to strengthen faith. But we should follow Margaret Wiley in drawing a distinction between scepticism as a product, a type of inverted dogmatism, and scepticism as an active process of truth-seeking by means of dialectical habits of thought (16–18). Johnson is vigorously sceptical in this latter sense, and much of his scepticism takes Bayle as its enabling precedent.

## II

While the lines of sceptical influence upon Johnson may be complex, tangled, and elusive, their effects are clear and immediate. Epistemologically, Johnson is guided by an effective and consistent theory of historical inquiry, and the best way to see this is to notice that he consistently applies constructively sceptical criteria to the evaluation of testimony in his masterpiece, the *Lives of the Poets*.

Deception and self-deception are such prevalent topics in the *Lives*

that they become a consistent, controlling theme; sceptical doubt is a natural response for a writer so concerned with the ways in which we deceive ourselves and others. Johnson "was indeed so much impressed with the prevalence of falsehood, voluntary or unintentional," Boswell writes, "that I never knew any person who upon hearing an extraordinary circumstance told, discovered more of the *incredulus odi*. He would say with a significant look and decisive tone, 'It is not so. Do not tell this again' " (3: 229).

Johnson's technique as a moralist-biographer is therefore always to enact doubt for us, teaching us by example to be on guard against falsehood—for moral judgment depends upon a sense of proportion in weighing probabilities, even to the point of a *nil admirari* refusal to be impressed. "Wonders are willingly told and willingly heard," Johnson writes, turning aside like Bayle in order to show the necessity of being on guard against our constitutional credulity, which he calls "the natural desire of man to propagate a wonder" (*Lives* 3: 172; 1: 3). In one sense, "wonder" is the enemy of morality itself, for Johnson remembers always that "we are affected only as we believe; we are improved only as we find something to be imitated or declined" (3: 438). Instruction depends upon credibility, and credibility depends upon a realistic sense of what is morally possible.

The *Lives* are studded with references to "common topics of falsehood" (1: 132) propagated by biographers and their subjects. Johnson's doubts are automatically stirred up whenever a tale is too obviously of the sort that people *want* to believe—to magnify their own importance, to gratify their malice or envy, or just to make a good story. Milton's purported refusal of a government post is suspect because "large offers and sturdy rejections are among the most common topics of falsehood" (1: 132). Similarly, Johnson dismisses the story of Dryden's being bitterly upset by Prior's mockery of *The Hind and the Panther*. Johnson attacks the story's credibility by making a comment on human gullibility: "By tales like these is the envy raised by superior abilities every day gratified; when they are attacked, every one hopes to see them humbled; what is hoped is readily believed, and what is believed is confidently told" (2: 182). Johnson is amused to see that, for the sake of a good story, witty comments are misattributed: "A pointed sentence is bestowed by successive transmission on the last whom it will fit" (2: 171). He is wryly aware that anecdotes are often believed simply because they are satisfying: Milton saved Davenant's life, according to one anecdote, and later Davenant saved Milton's. Johnson comments: "Here is a reciprocation of generosity and grati-

tude so pleasing that the tale makes its own way to credit" (1: 129). Johnson then goes on to demolish the anecdote's credibility.

In addition to expressing doubts based upon general human credibility, Johnson frequently comments upon his uncertainty about the motives and feelings of his subjects. Often he pulls back from explicit analyses of motives, and he sometimes states the grounds for his doubts in categorical terms: "The fact is certain; the motives we must guess" (2: 99). Again, comparing two sources whose analyses of motives disagree: "actions are visible, though motives are secret" (2: 15).

Such uncertainties become especially pressing when determining the subject's motives and feelings is essential to a full moral evaluation of him. An example is the ultimately unresolvable issue of Dryden's sincerity in his religious conversions. As a deductive premise Johnson proposes that a "conversion will always be suspected that apparently concurs with interest" (1: 377); yet "one [i.e., interest] may by accident introduce the other [i.e., truth]" (1: 378). Furthermore, we naturally "hope . . . that whoever is wise is also honest." "But," Johnson concludes, "enquiries into the heart are not for man; we must now leave him to his Judge" (1: 378).

The common element in these instances of Johnson's uncertainty is the problematic relationship between action and motive, which is a form of uncertainty about the relationship of signs to the things they signify. Sometimes Johnson will discredit a piece of evidence by questioning the probability of the signs themselves; thus a story about Addison's being upset about *Windsor Forest* is discredited because "[t]he pain that Addison might feel it is not likely that he would confess" (3: 106). On the other hand, when Johnson has reason to believe that a given action is a factual and reliable indication of his subject's feelings and motives, he says so. Some pages after the fairly elaborate analysis of Dryden's motives outlined above, Johnson refers to Dryden's subsequent action: "It is some proof of Dryden's sincerity in his second religion, that he taught it to his sons" (1: 394). Similarly, Dryden's "frequent bursts of resentment give reason to suspect" that his critics and rivals disturbed his peace of mind (1: 370).

Sometimes, as Robert Folkenflik has pointed out (74-77), Johnson presents a range of alternative motives which in effect engage the reader in the process of biographical interpretation: "Actuated therefore by zeal for Rome, or hope of fame, [Dryden] published *The Hind and the Panther*" (1: 380). In the *Life of Thomson*, Johnson suggests that "Thomson's bashfulness, or pride, or some other motive perhaps

not more laudable, withheld him" from acting in his own interest (3: 290). Characteristically, Johnson presents his most unflattering analyses as series of alternatives or as uncertain surmises, a technique Leo Braudy has called the "epistemological doublet" because it sceptically calls attention to the uncertainties of historical interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

Johnson frequently questions the validity of his sources, and his biographical scepticism expresses itself most clearly in his concern with all of Locke's criteria for evaluating testimony. These are, to recapitulate briefly: the number, skill, and integrity of witnesses; the intentions of authors; internal and circumstantial evidence that testimony is doubtful; and contrary testimony. There is of course no way to prove conclusively that Johnson consciously had these in mind as he evaluated biographical testimony; almost anyone involved in trying to establish biographical truth is bound to invoke one or more of these criteria. But the integrity and consistency of Johnson's methods allow one to make at least a probable case for the idea that his biographical scepticism derives from Locke's views on testimony.

Although Johnson certainly commits and perpetuates biographical errors, it is fair to say that he is scrupulous, particularly compared to other biographers of his day, in incorporating evaluation of testimony as part of his biographical method. In such major lives as *Swift*, *Milton*, and *Addison*, and in many of the less well-known lives, he turns aside frequently to comment upon his sources' unreliability and then shows how one can sort through such doubtful testimony to reach some probable account of the truth (see, for example, 1: 84, 222, 241, 301; 2: 18, 37, 116, 312-13; 3: 1, 281). Sometimes "nothing . . . can be known beyond what casual mention and uncertain tradition have supplied" (1: 331); sometimes it is impossible to determine "the writer's means of information or character of veracity" (1: 409). Sometimes the very absence of testimony itself is treated as evidence: "traditional memory retains no sallies of [Pope's] raillery nor sentences of observation, nothing either pointed or solid, either wise or merry," so Johnson infers that it is unlikely Pope excelled in conversation (3: 201). When testimony is by its very nature conjectural and inconclusive, Johnson brands it as such in quasi-legal terms: "a crime that admits no proof, why should we believe?" (1: 396) and "if accusation without proof be credited, who shall be innocent?" (1: 398).

Johnson often attacks the skill of the biographers whose writings he is using. Especially in the *Life of Milton* one can sense Johnson's frustration in trying to reach the truth despite the biographers' hagiographical reverence and frequent incompetence. "[T]his is another

instance which may confirm Dalrymple's observation," Johnson observes at one point, " 'that whenever Burnet's narrations are examined, he appears to be mistaken' " (1: 128).

Questions about the integrity of witnesses constantly arouse Johnson's scepticism. He is particularly on guard against evidence that witnesses are indulging in flattery, either of themselves or others. Pope's letters, for example, are self-serving in the way they "exhibit a perpetual and unclouded effulgence of general benevolence and particular fondness" (3: 206). Pope also liked to flatter himself by believing himself "important and formidable" (3: 181), occasionally threatening self-importantly to write no more. Johnson comments mordantly:

"There is nothing," says Juvenal, "that a man will not believe in his own favour." Pope had been flattered till he thought himself one of the moving powers in the system of life. When he talked of laying down his pen, those who sat around him intreated and implored, and self-love did not suffer him to suspect that they went away and laughed. (3: 153-54)

At its worst, self-flattery would seem to be morally harmless, though worthy of ridicule. But Johnson hates self-importance precisely because it leads to more serious distortions of the truth: "falsehoods from which no evil immediately visible ensues, except the general degradation of human testimony, are very lightly uttered, and once uttered are sullenly supported" (2: 213). Seemingly harmless distortions soon damage the self-flatterer's sense of moral proportion; thus Blackmore, though Johnson considered him "very honest," could "easily make a false estimate of his own importance: those whom their virtue restrains from deceiving others are often disposed by their vanity to deceive themselves" (2: 240). From self-deception it is only a short step to more serious folly: "He that is much flattered soon learns to flatter himself: we are commonly taught our duty by fear or shame, and how can they act upon the man who hears nothing but his own praises?" (3: 46). Johnson carries his moralizing treatment of self-flattery farthest in the *Life of Halifax*, which actually ends with a five-paragraph "moral essay" on the seductive appeal of flattery and self-flattery, so that Halifax becomes a warning example of the folly of believing those who sing our praises (2: 46-47).

Both in theory and in practice Johnson resists his predecessors' conception of biography as extended narrative in praise of an exemplary subject; he detests a life written as "a funeral oration rather than a history," distorted by "all the partiality of friendship" (1: 1; 2: 1). He questions biographical testimony whenever it bears signs of an overes-

timation of the subject: Warburton gullibly believes Pope stopped writing satires because of his "despair of prevailing over the corruption of his time" (3: 181); Tickell foolishly thinks Addison initialed his *Spectator* pieces to avoid "usurping the praise of others" (2: 105); Fenton naively implies that only Roscommon's severe judgment kept him from being prolific (1: 234–35).

In general, Johnson is especially wary of sources' favorable biases, but he also notes when testimony is consistently hostile. For example, he points out that "Burnet is not very favourable to his [Sprat's] memory" because "he and Burnet were old rivals" (2: 37). Johnson recognizes that to some extent, most testimony is potentially hostile; everyone envies the great, and thus everyone has some interest in spreading unflattering stories: "By tales like these is the envy raised by superior abilities every day gratified" (2: 182).

Johnson's suspicions are also frequently aroused by internal evidence that testimony is doubtful; in Locke's terms, either internal contradictions or unlikely circumstances may call a piece of testimony into doubt.

Johnson's frequent analyses of internal contradictions bring to mind the image of Johnson as a lawyer cross-examining witnesses. He cites Dryden's self-defense against the charge of plagiarism in one breath, and in the next points out that Dryden nevertheless "relates how much labour he spends in fitting for the English stage what he borrows from others" (1: 347–48). In the *Life of Butler*, Johnson cites Butler's brother as a witness that Butler attended Cambridge—but finds inconsistent his inability to identify his college, which "gives reason to suspect that he was resolved to bestow on him an academical education" (1: 202).

Johnson's most characteristic doubts, however, are stirred up by improbable circumstances. This is the area in which Johnson most clearly enjoys displaying his scepticism and showing the power of independent judgment operating upon experience. Rather than simply setting aside doubtful pieces of testimony, he exhibits them in good Baylean fashion and exposes their unlikeliness. Often the occasions for Johnson's doubts are relatively unimportant. He devotes a paragraph to probable arguments against the trivial though much-discussed notion that Milton's daughter could recite the opening lines of Homer, Ovid, and Euripides (1: 158–59). He argues against Swift's belief that eating fruit caused his ear malady: "Almost every boy eats as much fruit as he can get, without any great inconvenience" (3: 4). He finds it unlikely that one of Pope's instructors "could spend, with a boy who

had translated so much of *Ovid*, some months over a small part of Tully's *Offices*" (3: 86). With some typically Johnsonian calculations he attacks the apparently grandiose claim that William King read and wrote comments on 22,000 books and manuscripts: "The books were certainly not long, the manuscripts not very difficult, nor the remarks very large; for the calculator will find that he dispatched seven a day, for every day of his eight years, with a remnant that more than satisfies most other students" (2: 26).

Johnson has a keen eye for improbable behavior. As a student of the passions, Johnson knows the effects of envy too well to believe that John Philips "so much endeared himself to his schoolfellows . . . that they without murmur or ill-will saw him indulged by the master with particular immunities" (1: 312). As a writer well acquainted with the rigors of authorship, Johnson doubts that Christopher Pitt translated Virgil "with great indifference, and with a progress of which himself was hardly conscious" (3: 278). And as a careful observer of social behavior, Johnson doubts that Addison was as shy as Chesterfield claimed: "That man cannot be supposed very unexpert in the arts of conversation and practice of life, who, without fortune or alliance, by his usefulness and dexterity became secretary of state" (2: 119). In such passages we feel Johnson's scepticism at its most forceful. His arguments based on his knowledge of probable human behavior are persuasive and final.

Examples of Johnson's doubts arising from Locke's final criterion, contrary testimony, have already been discussed by implication; Johnson evaluates contrary testimony whenever he collates and compares various biographical sources. He uses an interesting rule of thumb: a person's enemies give more credible testimony for him than his friends do. We know that Swift worked hard to promote Pope's subscriptions because "there remains the testimony of Kennet, no friend to either him or Pope" (3: 130), and Blackmore, though "oftener mentioned by enemies than by friends," was never reproached for any failings in his private life (2: 236, 254-55). The view of Addison given by his friends "was never contradicted by his enemies" (2: 125) and may therefore be believed. Prior "lived at a time when the rage of party detected all which it was any man's interest to hide; and as little ill is heard of Prior it is certain that not much is known" (2: 197).

In the handling of biographical testimony, then, Johnson's practice fully accords with the Lockean criteria for evaluating the evidence of witnesses: collate and compare sources when evidence is scanty; weigh the witness's skill and integrity, particularly noting hostile and favor-



able biases and tendencies to flatter self or subject; weigh the witness's overall intentions; set aside evidence marred by unlikely circumstances or internal contradictions; resolve contradictions by giving added weight to such probable testimony as favorable accounts from hostile witnesses.

Johnson's importance as a founder of literary biography is based partly on his willingness to go still further in using literary evidence. He does not hesitate to use an author's works as evidence of his character, as in his extended analyses of Dryden and Pope, which link the author's personalities and works. In this area, as in others, Johnson sets a sceptical example for future literary biographers, because he is vigorously aware of the dangers of drawing biographical inferences from literary works. And while the sceptical tone and method of Johnson's biographies owe much to the sceptical modes of argument in the religious, scientific, and philosophical writings of his day, Johnson's biographical scepticism is grounded finally in his awareness of the difficulty of inferentially knowing another human being. His scepticism, in fact, is subsumed by his irony; the wish to understand another human being sometimes becomes another vain human wish which life ironically frustrates. He recognizes the ironies of the biographer's effort, which is merely the human effort to understand another, to understand one another:

The biographer of Thomson has remarked that an author's life is best read in his works: his observation was not well timed. Savage, who lived much with Thomson, once told me how he heard a lady remarking that she could gather from his works three parts of his character, that he was "a great lover, a great swimmer, and rigorously abstinent"; but, said Savage, he knows not any love but that of the sex; he was perhaps never in cold water in his life; and he indulges himself in all the luxury that comes within his reach. (3: 297-98)

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#### NOTES

1. The term "constructive scepticism" is used by Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (1960; rev. ed. 1964; Berkeley: U of California P, 1979). See also Popkin's two articles on scepticism in the eighteenth century. The most helpful discussion of Johnson's scepticism is still that by Robert Voitle; see his 168-80.
2. Philosophical scepticism traditionally has been sub-divided into two categories deriving from two Hellenistic schools of philosophy: Academic scepticism held "that no knowledge was possible," while Pyrrhonian scepticism held

- “that there was insufficient and inadequate evidence to determine if any knowledge was possible, and hence that one ought to suspend judgment” (Popkin, *History of Scepticism* xiii).
3. See Greene, *Library* 60; see also Johnson, *Lives* 2: 33. Subsequent references to the *Lives* are parenthetical, giving volume and page number.
  4. Shapiro 14. Johnson finished reading all of Bacon relatively late in life, but he had always admired and imitated Bacon’s prose style, and Bacon’s influence upon him was lifelong and pervasive; see Boswell 1: 219 and 3: 194.
  5. Like most writers, Schwartz treats Bacon as the representative exponent of the new science and its epistemology. For a contrasting view which places Bacon outside the mainstream of seventeenth-century sceptical epistemology and sees him instead as “essentially of the traditional Aristotelian pattern,” see Van Leeuwen 1–12.
  6. Robert Folkenflik points out Johnson’s use of such doublets and cites Brady on Gibbon in *Samuel Johnson, Biographer* 74–75n9.

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