



Johnson's Anatomy of the Lie

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Articles and Talks



Johnson's Anatomy of the Lie

It is a first rule of rhetoric that the last thing a writer should do is to begin by offending the audience. This essay presents Johnson's anatomy of the lie and asks forgiveness at the outset because, as Johnson realized, we all lie more than we are willing to admit, and we lie especially to ourselves. William Hogarth remarked that, "Johnson . . . though so wise a fellow, is more like king David than king Solomon; for he says in his haste that all men are liars." Reporting this in her *Anecdotes*, Mrs. Piozzi adds, "This charge, as I afterwards came to know, was but too well founded: Mr. Johnson's incredulity amounted almost to disease, and I have seen it mortify his companions exceedingly."¹

However, according to current research in psychology, touched on later in this essay, we do lie frequently. Johnson writes and speaks about this subject often, though no one has examined his thought on it in an extended way. Much is written about Johnson and truth—in literature, criticism, or life at large. That related subject is vital, but not the same. Over the possibility of lying he is perpetually vigilant and devotes several essays and one sermon to it. Awareness of the prevalence of lying saturates his writing and conversation. He develops an anatomy of the lie that informs his thinking on religion, parenting, medicine, politics, history—including the writing of history—morality, education, and friendship. Even in contexts one might not expect it to appear, it does, as in the *Life of Pope*: "Friendship has no tendency to secure veracity."²

An anatomy breaks a subject into classes, parts, and their sub-

1 Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., during the Last Twenty Years of his Life*, in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (1897), 1:241, hereafter cited as *Anecdotes*. See also *Boswell's Life of Johnson, Together with 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., 2nd ed. (1964-71), 3:229n3 (hereafter cited as *Life*), where Boswell makes a similar remark about Johnson's

"*incredulus odi*," quoted below. This essay is adapted from an address to the Samuel Johnson Society of the West, 23 November 2014, and I thank the Society for acting as such generous hosts and discussing the remarks in a way that has informed and improved this essay.

2 *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (hereafter cited as *Yale*), vols. 21-23, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. John H. Middendorf et al. (2010), 23:1174.

divisions, something akin to bullet points grouped into component parts of a total organization. Francis Bacon used the technique of intellectual anatomy in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), a book that Johnson liked and quotes. Boswell reports, too, that Johnson confessed that "Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, he said was the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise" (*Life* 4:209n2; 2:121). Writing about Burton, Northrop Frye describes an anatomy as a "dissection or analysis" that uses "a single intellectual pattern" as a lens to focus the entirety of life.³ Johnson grinds his lens as a practical moralist, not a systematic philosopher. His approach parallels what Northcote quotes as Sir Joshua Reynolds's report of what Johnson said concerning Bacon's *Essays*: "'their value consisted in being the observations of a strong mind operating on life; and in consequence you find there what you seldom find in other books.'"⁴

Johnson's anatomy of the lie, his own strong mind operating on life, must be gleaned then reconstructed from remarks in Boswell's *Life*, in *Rambler*, *Adventurer*, and *Idler* essays, in statements throughout the *Lives of the Poets*, the *Sermons*, literary criticism, letters, and miscellaneous prose, as well as records from Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi (*Anecdotes*) and other contemporaries. He has no truck with conundrums such as "Everything I say is a lie." *Rambler* 95 implies that as an adolescent he had graduated from such logical paradox in order to pursue a more mature course. In *Adventurer* 50 (28 April 1753), he tellingly remarks: "The casuists have very diligently distinguished lyes into their several classes, according to their various degrees of malignity."⁵ I have yet to find where Johnson read, or probably read, such an anatomy of lies. His own anatomy, not articulated in one place, appeals to levels of malice only vaguely. In addition, he anatomizes lies that are permitted, even morally demanded. If one were to chart his anatomy (as anatomies often were), it would look something like this:

A. Inexcusable Lies

1. Lies Fashionable and Popular, Lies of Wonder
2. Lies of Vanity and Distinction
3. Lies of Disputation and Paradox
4. Butler or Servant Lies
5. Wandering Lies; Apologies

3 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), 310, 311.

4 *Life* 3:194n1 gives as reference "Northcote's *Reynolds* ii. 281," which is James Northcote, *Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 2 vols., 2nd. ed. (1818 [1813]), 2:281.

5 *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell (1963), Yale 2:363. Editors of subsequent volumes cited are named parenthetically.

6. Political Lies
7. Lies to the Sick, or of a professional to a client
- 8a. Lies to One's Self
- 8b. Lies to God (and One's Self)
9. Lies that Disarm Their Own Force

B. Lies Permitted, Even Demanded

10. Consecrated Lies (~ White Lies)
11. Epitaphs and Lapidary Inscriptions
12. Lies Culturally Accepted, even Expected
13. Lies of Moral Obligation or Prior Promise

C. All are Fallible and the Fragility of Truth; A Warning to Writers and Scholars

Lies may carry "various degrees of malignity," but Johnson flatly states, "The character of a liar is at once so hateful and contemptible, that even of those who have lost their virtue it might be expected, that from the violation of truth they should be restrained by their pride," a kind of honor among thieves (*Adventurer* 50, Yale 2:362). Moreover, *Idler* 20 begins, "There is no crime more infamous than the violation of truth" (Yale 2:62). If there is a molten, iron core to Johnson's earth, it is his concern over "the violation of truth." The first definition of "lie" in the *Dictionary* is "a criminal falshood" (emphasis added), the second "a falshood." Johnson often uses "falsehood," a word now not much in fashion. There, "hood" indicates a condition or state of being, something that exists with a certain quality, and something that reflects the being or character of the person who perpetrates what is false. Johnson perhaps bestowed one compliment on lies. If he did write chapter 11 of book 9 of Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote*, a question not perfectly settled, then there he states, "The only excellence of falsehood is its resemblance to truth." Whether he or Lennox wrote it, the statement is telling.⁶

⁶ See Deborah L. Ross, *The Excellence of Falsehood: Romance, Realism, and Women's Contribution to the Novel* (1991), 97 and n7; also Patricia Meyer Spacks, "The Subtle Sophistry of Desire: Dr. Johnson and *The Female Quixote*," *Modern Philology*, special issue *From Restoration to Revision: Essays in Honor of Gwin J. Kolb and Edward W. Rosenheim*, ed. Janel Mueller and Bruce Redford, 85:4 (May 1988): 532-42. Spacks discusses authorship of the chapter (534 and n) and probes the allure of romances for women then, as well as Johnson's attraction to them and to Lennox's book, which he admired. Lennox satirizes romances but realizes "the psychic need for

alternatives to a socially defined state of meaningless and powerless activity" (533). Johnson's early indulgence in romances may have had similar roots. Spacks's fascinating essay on Johnson and truth should be mentioned: "Reading Dr. Johnson: A Confession," in *Under Criticism: Essays for William H. Pritchard*, ed. David Soffield and Herbert F. Tucker (Ohio University Press, 1998), 167-81. O M Brack, Jr. and Susan Carlile canvass the controversy concerning Johnson's authorship of Lennox's chapter in "Samuel Johnson's Contributions to Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*," *Yale University Library Gazette*, 77:3/4 (April 2003), 166-73.

A. Inexcusable Lies, the Nature of a Lie, Motives, and Damage to Knowledge

On the subject of the lie, many readers immediately may recall one statement from Johnson: "He *lies*, and he *knows* he *lies*." Such a lie is conscious and deliberate. Here is the context from Boswell's *Life*:

It is remarkable, that in the *Life* of Broome, Johnson takes notice of Dr. Warburton's using a mode of expression which he himself used, and that not seldom, to the great offence of those who did not know him. Having occasion to mention a note, stating the different parts which were executed by the associated translators of "The *Odyssey*," he says, "Dr. Warburton told me, in his warm language, that he thought the relation given in the note *a lie*." The language is *warm* indeed; and, I must own, cannot be justified in consistency with a decent regard to the established forms of speech. Johnson had accustomed himself to use the word *lie*, to express a mistake or an error in relation; in short, when the *thing was not so as told*, though the relator did not mean to deceive. When he thought there was intentional falsehood in the relator, his expression was, "He *lies*, and he *knows* he *lies*." (*Life* 4:49)

This stresses a conscious effort to be certain that what one says could not possibly be false. It parses action and speech not by motive but by result; it condemns deception even if not intended; it is a consequentialist view and increases the burden of verification, especially if one is repeating what others have stated. If we put this together with Johnson's use of "falsehood," we see that lying has for him epistemological and ontological dimensions: it damages knowledge—and it simultaneously damages the state of being human.

1. Lies Fashionable and Popular, Lies of Wonder

Johnson abhors letting pass for true something in history or society that is false or unfair because it has become fashionable or popular. Boswell reported that in *The Gentleman's Magazine* Johnson comments on "Mr. Tytler's acute and able vindication of Mary Queen of Scots." He finds that "the generosity of Johnson's feelings shines forth in the following sentence[s]":

"It has now been fashionable, for near half a century, to defame and vilify the house of Stuart, and to exalt and magnify the reign of Elizabeth. The Stuarts have found few apologists, for the dead cannot pay for praise; and who will, without reward, oppose the tide of popularity? Yet there remains still among us, not wholly extinguished, a zeal for truth, a desire of establishing right in opposition to fashion." (*Life* 1:353-54)

A lie may establish, but just as often it perpetuates, a falsehood; and the first usually leads to the second. Indeed, "A few men are sufficient to broach falsehoods, which are afterwards innocently diffused by successive relaters" (Johnson's review of Warton's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*, quoted in *Life* 3:229). Soon, the communal state of knowledge is corrupted, and it may be hard, even with sacrifice and time, to mend it.

Johnson believes that each lie, widely repeated, becomes what he calls "a wandering lie" (see below), which, growing common, goes unexamined. Hill and Powell, editors of Boswell's *Life*, cite instances of lies noted by Johnson that are told in order to excite wonder or perpetuate what seems common opinion. In the *Life of Congreve*: "nobody can live long without knowing that falsehoods of convenience or vanity, 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" (quoted in *Life* 3:229n1). ("Sullenly" in the *Dictionary* is related to malignity.) Johnson will not let the subject go: "Johnson speaks of 'the natural desire of man to propagate a wonder.' *Life of Cowley*. 'Wonders,' he says 'are willingly told and willingly heard.' *Life of Pope*. Speaking of Voltaire he says:—'It is the great failing of a strong imagination to catch greedily at wonders' " (quoted in *Life* 3:229n3).

2. Lies of Vanity and Distinction, or Worse

Johnson believed that his discussions of the lies of vanity and distinction were unique and important moral observations. As one example where he himself was the object of such a falsehood, Boswell records Johnson on 21 March 1783, drawing a contrast between Burke and Thomas Sheridan and their talk:

"A man accustomed to throw for a thousand pounds, if set down to throw for sixpence, would not be at the pains to count his dice. Burke's talk is the ebullition of

his mind; he does not talk from a desire of distinction, but because his mind is full."

He thus curiously characterised one of our old acquaintance: "***** [Mr. Thomas Sheridan] is a good man, Sir; but he is a vain man and a liar. He, however, only tells lies of vanity; of victories, for instance, in conversation, which never happened." This alluded to a story which I had repeated from that gentleman, to entertain Johnson with its wild bravado: "This Johnson, Sir, (said he [Sheridan],) whom you are all afraid of, will shrink if you come close to him in argument, and roar as loud as he. He once maintained the paradox, that there is no beauty but in utility. 'Sir, (said I,) what say you to the peacock's tail, which is one of the most beautiful objects in nature, but would have as much utility if its feathers were all of one colour.' He *felt* what I thus produced, and had recourse to his usual expedient, ridicule; exclaiming, 'A peacock has a tail, and a fox has a tail;' and then he burst out into a laugh.—'Well, Sir, (said I, with a strong voice, looking him full in the face,) you have unkenneled your fox; pursue him if you dare.' He had not a word to say, Sir." Johnson told me, that this was a fiction from beginning to end. (*Life* 4:167 and n3)

Johnson has heard a story of his being defeated by old Mr. Sheridan in a mock debate, but Johnson informs Boswell that it is a complete fabrication, told by Sheridan for the vanity of seeming to vanquish Johnson in conversation. What might be overlooked is that Johnson, while calling Sheridan "a vain man and a liar," prefaces his correction of Sheridan with the apparently contradictory yet unambiguous statement that Sheridan "*is a good man.*" This, it seems, is because Johnson recognizes that almost no one escapes, at one time or another, perpetrating such lies of vanity and distinction, that common human nature indulges in them. (Modern research indicates that men in general tell such lies more often than women.) If we refused to call someone "good" simply for having on occasion told such lies, there would be no good people left.

Johnson says that the casuists who ranked lies by degrees of malice "generally omitted that which is most common, and, perhaps, not least mischievous; which, since the moralists have not given it a name, I shall distinguish as the Lye of Vanity," a type of

lie Johnson points out many times. He goes on in the next paragraph: "To vanity may justly be imputed most of the falsehoods, which every man perceives hourly playing upon his ear, and, perhaps, most of those that are propagated with success" (*Adventurer* 50, Yale 2:363).

The correspondent Pertinax in *Rambler* 95 indulges lies of disputation and of paradox (see below), though he says that he does so from vanity: "I was now in the place [the Temple, where lawyers practice] where every one catches the contagion of vanity [echoing "the contagion of the gown" in *Vanity of Human Wishes*], and soon began to distinguish myself by sophisms and paradoxes." Pertinax ends his account by identifying the cause of his errors: "gratifying my vanity by the support of falsehood" (*The Rambler*, 3 vols., ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, Yale 4:145, 148).

In *Rambler* 189, Johnson again considers lies of vanity but adds that more than vanity may be the motive. Playing on vanity to establish a reputation may be "necessary to the accomplishment of some subsequent design." Such liars "value praise only as it may conduce to the success of avarice or ambition" (Yale 5:225). That subsequent design usually involves power and may be obtained through flattery, itself a kind of lie: "No species of falsehood is more frequent than flattery" (*Rambler* 96, Yale 4:149). Benjamin Disraeli's political advice is bluntly honest. Having "climbed to the top of the greasy pole," he could advise, "Everyone likes flattery; and when you come to Royalty you should lay it on with a trowel." But that remark, and his flattery of the queen designed, in Johnson's phrase, to "conduce to the success of . . . ambition," came back to haunt Disraeli when people compared it to his private disparagement of Victoria.⁷

3. Lies of Disputation and Paradox

Johnson had early experience with this type of lie, a self-recognition prompted by his remark that Goldsmith "struck out" from the *Vicar of Wakefield* this passage (Johnson took Goldsmith's manuscript to a bookseller and sold it for him): "When I was a young man, being anxious to distinguish myself, I was perpetually starting new propositions. But I soon gave this over; for, I found that generally what was new was false" (*Life* 3:376). The editors' note in Boswell's *Life* takes up the theme and quotes what remains in the *Vicar*: "Finding that the best things

remained to be said on the wrong side, I resolved to write a book that should be wholly new. I therefore drest up three paradoxes with some ingenuity. They were false, indeed, but they were new.' *Vicar of Wakefield*, ch. xx. See ante, i. 441 [*Life* 1:441], where Johnson says:— 'When I was a boy, I used always to choose the wrong side of a debate, because most ingenious things, that is to say, most new things, could be said upon it.' In the *Present State of Polite Learning* (ch. vii.), Goldsmith says:— 'Nothing can be a more certain sign, that genius is in the wane, than its being obliged to fly to paradox for support, and attempting to be erroneously agreeable' (*Life* 3:376 and n1). As in many of Johnson's reflections on behavior and motive, his awareness comes from more than observation; it results from his own earlier actions that he has examined and often condemned.

4. Butler or Servant Lies

On 19 July 1763, Boswell visits Johnson in his library, "contained in two garrets over his Chambers":

The floor was strewed with manuscript leaves, in Johnson's own hand-writing, which I beheld with a degree of veneration, supposing they perhaps might contain portions of the *Rambler*, or of *Rasselas*. I observed an apparatus for chymical experiments, of which Johnson was all his life very fond. The place seemed to be very favourable for retirement and meditation. Johnson told me, that he went up thither without mentioning it to his servant, when he wanted to study, secure from interruption; for he would not allow his servant to say he was not at home when he really was. "A servant's strict regard for truth, (said he) must be weakened by such a practice. A philosopher may know that it is merely a form of denial; but few servants are such nice distinguishers. If I accustom a servant to tell a lie for me, have I not reason to apprehend that he will tell many lies for *himself*?" I am, however, satisfied that every servant, of any degree of intelligence, understands saying his master is not at home, not at all as the affirmation of a fact, but as customary words, intimating that his master wishes not to be seen; so that there can be no bad effect from it. (*Life* 1:435-36)

⁷ John O'Connell, "Disraeli," *British Political Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Keith Laybourn (2001), 106.

To this day, those who research human truthfulness, or its lack, still refer to “butler” or “servant” lies because they were for so long culturally ingrained in common behavior. Researchers conclude that they still are (see below). Boswell’s comment helps explain why. He assumes “that there can be no bad effect from it.” Yet, Johnson’s protest is not only that one who lies for someone else, even a superior—or especially a superior—may learn to lie for one’s own self, it is also a wariness that such common “butler” lies become customary, a habit, and permit, as second nature, things untrue to go unexamined.

5. Wandering Lies; Apologies for Accusations of Falsehood

Hogarth, in his comment quoted at the beginning of this essay, says that Johnson’s pouncing on lies and falsehoods would “mortify his companions exceedingly,” an anecdote passed on by Mrs. Thrale, who from time to time experienced friction with Johnson over the matter of telling truth.

“I never,” writes Mrs. Piozzi, “heard Johnson pronounce the words, ‘I beg your pardon, Sir,’ to any human creature but the apparently soft and gentle Dr. Burney.” Burney had asked her whether she had subscribed £100 to building a bridge. “It is very comical, is it not, Sir?” said I, turning to Dr. Johnson, “that people should tell such unfounded stories.” “It is,” answered he, “neither comical nor serious, my dear; it is only a wandering lie.” This was spoken in his natural voice, without a thought of offence, I am confident; but up bounced Burney in a towering passion, and to my much amaze, put on the hero, surprising Dr. Johnson into a sudden request for pardon, and protestation of not having ever intended to accuse his friend of a falsehood.” Hayward’s *Piozzi*, ii. 78. (*Life* 4:49n3)⁸

After an intemperate letter to her about her intention to marry Gabriel Piozzi, Johnson did apologize to Hester Thrale. Near the end of this essay, his personal, direct admonition to her about being on guard against falsehood will come into play (see below). However, when she was not present, he could also use her, with

⁸ The reference to “Hayward’s *Piozzi*” is to the *Autobiography, Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs. Piozzi (Thrale)*, ed. A. Hayward (1861), and in that edition is found at 1:312-13 under “Notes

on *Letters To and From Dr. Johnson*.” Hill and Powell may be citing a 1910 or other edition, or it may be a slip.

apparent frustration, as an example of not being careful with the truth, something Boswell seems not unhappy to relate:

He talked to me with serious concern of a certain female friend’s “laxity of narration, and inattention to truth.”—“I am as much vexed (said he) at the ease with which she hears it mentioned to her, as at the thing itself. I told her, ‘Madam, you are contented to hear every day said to you, what the highest of mankind have died for, rather than bear.’—You know, Sir, the highest of mankind have died rather than bear to be told they had uttered a falsehood. Do talk to her of it: I am weary.” (*Life* 3:243)

While Johnson may have been willing to call Thomas Sheridan “good,” even though Sheridan told lies of vanity, here he makes a further distinction: that “the highest of mankind” will be mortified to be told that they have lied. So, Johnson is “vexed” at how easily Mrs. Thrale apparently receives the hint that her own conversation is not strictly true. Boswell does not identify the female friend, but it is clear it is Mrs. Thrale. A few pages earlier, Boswell had delighted to give an instance of Johnson correcting the accuracy of one of her stories (*Life* 3:226). We do not have her side of the story, but do know that in neither of the two copies of the *Life* that she annotated did she mark, or write marginalia for, this passage.⁹

Nevertheless, to return to the matter of an apology for the false accusation of lying (itself a notable kind of lie, as Johnson realized, and a serious one): Mrs. Thrale said she heard Johnson make such an apology only once, and then to Dr. Burney. However, if Boswell had lived to read her notes on her correspondence with Johnson (where her story about Johnson’s apology to Burney appears), he would dispute the unique nature of his apology to Burney, for Boswell says, apparently as a witness:

No man was more ready to make an apology when he had censured unjustly, than Johnson. When a proof-sheet of one of his works was brought to him, he found fault with the mode in which a part of it was arranged, refused to read it, and in a passion desired that the

⁹ Edward G. Fletcher, ed., *The Life of Samuel Johnson . . . with marginal comments and markings . . . by Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi*, 3 vols. (Heritage Press, 1963 [1938]), 2:453, here-

after cited as Fletcher. The two copies are in the Houghton Library, Harvard, as part of the Donald and Mary Hyde Collection of Dr. Samuel Johnson.

compositor might be sent to him. The compositor was Mr. Manning, a decent sensible man, who had composed about one half of his "Dictionary," when in Mr. Strahan's printing-house; and a great part of his "Lives of the Poets," when in that of Mr. Nichols; and who (in his seventy-seventh year), when in Mr. Baldwin's printing-house, composed a part of the first edition of this work [Boswell's *Life*] concerning him. By producing the manuscript, he at once satisfied Dr. Johnson that he was not to blame. Upon which Johnson candidly and earnestly said to him, "Mr. Compositor, I ask your pardon. Mr. Compositor, I ask your pardon, again and again." (*Life* 4:321)

As Hill and Powell note, John Hawkins says that he had heard that Johnson often apologized, even "with tears in his eyes," to those he offended with roughness or contradictions; also noted is that Johnson points out in his *Life of Savage* how Savage, with "superstitious regard to the correction of his sheets," would become upset at a misplaced comma in the compositor's work, and that a single erroneous letter was "a heavy calamity" (*Life* 4:321n1, n2). Now that Johnson has caught himself in the very same "superstitious regard," he begs pardon, perhaps recalling that Savage would not. (Any editor of Johnson's work knows that he often took great care with little details in the printing of his work, and in later editions often made minor, even minute alterations.)

Apologizing for a false accusation or mistake may recall *Rambler* 31, "Defence of a Known Mistake Highly Culpable," in which Johnson states: "As all error is meanness, it is incumbent on every man who consults his own dignity, to retract it as soon as he discovers it, without fearing any censure so much as that of his own mind." Here there is the assumption that everyone will err, and will at one time or another tell a lie without knowing it is a lie. In that case, retraction should avoid censure—as long as it is done "as soon as he discovers it," a lesson for politicians and pundits as well as common people. "As justice requires that all injuries should be repaired, it is the duty of him who has seduced others by bad practices, or false notions, to endeavour that such as have adopted his errors should know his retraction, and that those who have learned vice by his example, should by his example be taught amendment" (*Yale* 3:173). Johnson famously admitted (and corrected) errors in the *Dictionary* (s.v. *pastern*, for example).

6. Political Lies

The time-honored practice of lying in politics, which John Arbuthnot had already treated brilliantly in his essay "The Art of Political Lying" (1712), is one to which Johnson will not give much leeway, if any, though his own politics come into play. On 15 April 1773, after Burke had served in Parliament eight years, Boswell records this comment by Johnson, who never faced the exigencies of practical politics:

An eminent publick character being mentioned [almost certainly Burke];—JOHNSON. "I remember being present when he shewed himself to be so corrupted, or at least something so different from what I think right, as to maintain, that a member of parliament should go along with his party right or wrong. Now, Sir, this is so remote from native virtue, from scholastick virtue, that a good man must have undergone a great change before he can reconcile himself to such a doctrine. It is maintaining that you may lie to the publick; for you lie when you call that right which you think wrong, or the reverse. A friend [probably Reynolds] of ours, who is too much an echo of that gentleman, observed, that a man who does not stick uniformly to a party, is only waiting to be bought. Why then, said I, he is only waiting to be what that gentleman is already." (*Life* 2:222-23 and n4)

That is, the one gentleman has already sold out, and the second is merely waiting for the right price. Yet, the criticism, if it is indeed of Burke, is too harsh. Perhaps Johnson changed his mind after Burke wrote his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* and in long service demonstrated as much integrity, or more, as could be expected from any politician.

Aside from identifying Burke and Reynolds (leaning on Croker's edition of Boswell's *Life* to do so), Hill and Powell note, "Fanny Burney says that when *Evelina* was first published, 1778, 'that small work was nearly the only subject upon which they [Johnson and Burke] met without contestation'. *Wanderer*, Ep. Ded. p. x." This antagonism, likely stirred by differing political views, may have caused Johnson to judge Burke harshly at that time. In April 1776, when Burke and Johnson held distinctly different views about the American War, Boswell relates:

Of a person who differed from him in politicks, he said, "In private life he is a very honest gentleman; but I will not allow him to be so in publick life. People may be honest, though they are doing wrong: that is between their Maker and them. But we, who are suffering by their pernicious conduct, are to destroy them. We are sure that —— acts from interest. We know what his genuine principles were. They who allow their passions to confound the distinctions between right and wrong, are criminal. They may be convinced; but they have not come honestly by their conviction." [Hill and Powell note:] Mr. E. J. Payne, criticising this passage, says:—"It is certain that Burke never thought he was deserting any principle of his own in joining the Rockinghams." Payne's *Burke*, i. xvii. (*Life* 3:45, and n3; 45-46; 46n1).

In fact, the political motivation for Johnson is strong. In many ways it accounts for his rough treatment of Milton as well as of Burke here. Even when Johnson is half-joking about political opposition, his vehemence carries a note discordant to some degree with what he says about lies and dishonesty elsewhere. For example, on the Tour with Boswell, he declaims: "[William] Pulteney was as paltry a fellow as could be. He was a Whig, who pretended to be honest; and you know it is ridiculous for a Whig to pretend to be honest. He cannot hold it out" (*Life* 5:339). A recent look at political lying, with its humorous aspects, is Al Franken's *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right* (2003). Al, my college classmate, was for years a comedian until he decided to enter a funnier business. He was in 2014 elected to a second term as US senator from Minnesota. Despite Franken's title and the primary object of his scorn, political lies remain one of the few modes of ideological representation that are truly non-partisan, an equal opportunity for every party, a point wickedly clear in Steven Colbert's invention of the concept and word "truthiness," which he applied to the entire political spectrum. Examples of political lies and truthiness come without effort. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." "Well, I am not a crook."

Serious consequences can attend political lies, especially when they offer pretexts for war. The Native American in *Idler* 81 (sometimes numbered 82) finds that both the French and the English have lied to him and his people even as they overrun native hunting grounds. In *The Vanity of Human Wishes* the line "How nations sink, by darling schemes oppressed," whether vengeance is

involved or not, might apply to the Vietnam War, or to more than one nation as the consequence of the lie (even a conscious lie on the part of some) about weapons of mass destruction, which some wags in the press later called weapons of mass deception. Ignorance empowered by policy is falsehood of a terrible kind, a sort of national delusion. Countless times it has led to needless suffering without gaining the object it originally professed.

7. Lying to the Sick—Lies Told by Professionals

About this Johnson is vehement, though the circumstances are unclear. He tells Boswell emphatically: "But I deny the lawfulness of telling a lie to a sick man for fear of alarming him." In this situation, says Johnson, you cannot be any kind of consequentialist, "You have no business with consequences; you are to tell the truth. Besides, you are not sure what effect your telling him that he is in danger may have. It may bring his distemper to a crisis, and that may cure him." Then this: "Of all lying, I have the greatest abhorrence of this, because I believe it has been frequently practised on myself" (*Life* 4:306). What does Johnson have in mind? It could, perhaps, be about his physical health, though it could also be his fear of losing rationality, or that he had, in fact, at certain times lost his powers of reason, though others might have told him he was well and sane. This could have happened when he was young, not long after he left Oxford, or again in his later middle age, and at both periods more than once. His protest remains enigmatic, though Johnson is categorical about having experienced such lies, and "frequently," too. Here, he is not thinking of perhaps at some earlier time having told a lie of vanity or of paradox himself, or of having made a false accusation, but of having received false reassurance, or perhaps a false diagnosis.

8a. Lies to One's Self, Self-Deception; Possible Loss of Rationality

Whether that remark refers to his mental state or not, Johnson did at times think something wrong with his mind. His youthful letter to Dr. Samuel Swynfen was about possible loss of rationality, that is, loss of the ability to discern truth from delusion—a letter written in Latin to help preserve confidentiality and perhaps to reassure Johnson that he could recall that language accurately. (Dr. Swynfen's daughter, Elizabeth Desmoulins, lived with Johnson later in life. She is a character in Samuel Beckett's abortive play *Human Wishes*. Beckett had studied Johnson intensely. Was it

something about the absolute strictness, the seemingly impossible standard of Johnson's demand for truth that attracted Beckett, or perhaps prevented completion of that play?) Moreover, if one is deranged, then how can one detect self-deception? The mad Astronomer in *Rasselas* comes to mind.

Johnson's sense that he had underachieved, had done little, and had squandered his talents is painful and obvious. His *Diary* in 1772 states, "In life little has been done, and life is very far advanced. Lord have mercy upon me" (*Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E. L. McAdam with Donald and Mary Hyde, Yale 1:152). This is an appeal to mercy when one can no longer help one's self, or perhaps even grasp what others may regard as one's own self-deception. When Johnson turned his truth meter on himself, he could be relentless. He spent much time reading romances when young (see note 6 above) and much time disparaging romances as falsehoods. Yet for him they seemed, as for many readers, an escape from self-demand, a way to avoid a sense of powerlessness, and the sound of life's clock ticking down, yet, paradoxically, a way to avoid active, conscious lies of one's own. As his own most harsh judge, Johnson detected in himself the self-deception that he might be employing time in a worthy manner. This in turn caused guilt, which might be relieved by more escape, a vicious cycle.

Self-deception is not unrelated to lies that are told about one's self that one actually prefers to certain truths exposed about one's self. Johnson was acute in noticing that, "a man had rather have a hundred lies told of him, than one truth which he does not wish should be told" (*Life* 2:221-22). This external aid to self-deception is comforting. The Nixon tapes preserve countless hours of things said that are not strictly true or not true at all, yet there will forever remain eighteen minutes erased that might have contained at least one truth that now can never be known.

Self-deception Johnson addresses in *Rambler* 28, on the theme of know thyself. It is worth quoting at length:

Those representations of imaginary virtue are generally considered as arts of hypocrisy, and as snares laid for confidence and praise. But I believe the suspicion often unjust; those who thus propagate their own reputation, only extend the fraud by which they have been themselves deceived; for this failing is incident to numbers, who seem to live without designs, competitions, or pursuits; it appears on occasions which promise no accession of honour or of profit, and to persons from whom very little is to be hoped or feared.

It is, indeed, not easy to tell how far we may be blinded by the love of ourselves. . . .

To lay open all the sources from which error flows in upon him who contemplates his own character, would require more exact knowledge of the human heart, than, perhaps, the most acute and laborious observers have acquired. And, since falsehood may be diversified without end, it is not unlikely that every man admits an imposture in some respect peculiar to himself, as his views have been accidentally directed, or his ideas particularly combined. . . .

One sophism by which men persuade themselves that they have those virtues which they really want [lack], is formed by the substitution of single acts for habits. A miser who once relieved a friend from the danger of a prison, suffers his imagination to dwell for ever upon his own heroic generosity; he yields his heart up to indignation at those who are blind to merit, or insensible to misery, and who can please themselves with the enjoyment of that wealth, which they never permit others to partake. From any censures of the world, or reproaches of his conscience, he has an appeal to action and to knowledge; and though his whole life is a course of rapacity and avarice, he concludes himself to be tender and liberal, because he has once performed an act of liberality and tenderness. (Yale 3:152-53)

One wonders if Dickens had read this when he conceived of that glorious, hilarious, and ridiculous deceiver, Pecksniff. It would take many more essays to trace how Johnson's moral thought about falsehood, lies, and self-deception seems to inform later authors, some of whom admired him: Crabbe, Austen, Scott, Dickens.

8b. A Lie in Prayer, which is a lie to one's self and to God

Boswell relates, "I mentioned Jeremy Taylor's using, in his forms of prayer, 'I am the chief of sinners,' and other such self-condemning expressions. 'Now, (said I) this cannot be said with truth by every man, and therefore is improper for a general printed form. I myself cannot say that I am the worst of men; I *will* not say so.'" Johnson is hyper-vigilant in conscience about that judgment and counters: "A man may know, that physically, that is, in the real state of things, he is not the worst man; but that morally he may be

so.’” Johnson adds that in *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729), a book that much impressed him when young and skeptical, William Law observes, “Every man knows something worse of himself, than he is sure of in others.’” So, Johnson continues, “You may not have committed such crimes as some men have done; but you do not know against what degree of light they have sinned. Besides, Sir, “the chief of sinners” is a mode of expression for “I am a great sinner.” So St. Paul, speaking of our SAVIOUR’S having died to save sinners, says, “of whom I am the chief;” yet he certainly did not think himself so bad as Judas Iscariot.’”

One might think that here things would end. However, Boswell pursues, “‘But, Sir, Taylor means it literally, for he founds a conceit upon it. When praying for the conversion of sinners, and of himself in particular, he says, “LORD, thou wilt not leave thy *chief* work undone.’”’” Johnson will have none of this: “‘I do not approve of figurative expressions in addressing the Supreme Being; and I never use them.’” It is as if Johnson had long brooded on the subject. He quickly cites Taylor, almost verbatim, from memory: “Taylor gives a very good advice: “Never lie in your prayers; never confess more than you really believe; never promise more than you mean to perform.”’” Boswell apparently falls silent, though in writing the *Life* appends the observation that, “I recollected this precept in his [Taylor’s] ‘Golden Grove,’” and adds, “but his *example* for prayer contradicts his *precept*” (*Life* 4:294-95 and notes). It is as if Boswell needs to have the last word on this score, perhaps to reassure his own conscience, or to satisfy himself that such a strict standard not even a famous divine could put into practice.

All this, and Johnson’s attitude, recall Wordsworth’s later lines in the 1805 *Prelude*:

... that religious dignity of mind,
That is the very faculty of truth.

In Johnson’s *Vanity*, “The secret ambush of a specious prayer” is the pith of the matter.

Interlude: Modern Research

Modern research into telling lies tends to confirm every one of Johnson’s observations and, as far as I can tell, contradicts none of them. A short excursus into that research reveals how perceptive Johnson was, and how his categories still stand up. Such recent research, filled with “controls,” data, and charts, yields interesting results, especially about the demography of certain kinds of lies. It reinforces Johnson’s observations without referring to him, and

very rarely to any moralist. Its evidence is directly empirical. One place to start would be Dan Ariely’s fine book *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone, Especially Ourselves*.¹⁰ Ariely in an NPR interview with Tom Ashbrook for the program *On Point* on 16 July 2014, stated to each listener in the radio audience, “You are a cheater, a liar, possibly a thief.” He notes in his book that the greater distance there is between teller and recipient, the easier it seems to lie. For example, emails, things in writing, or things that are anonymous are more likely to contain lies (and the easier the lie, the more often the lie) than face-to-face confrontations and oral statements. The court system of a defendant seeing and hearing an accuser has old wisdom in it. Despite this tendency to use writing or texts as a medium for lying, it is reported that Johnson said of Dr. John Campbell, “Campbell will lie, but he never lies on paper,” and later repeated that sentiment: “Why, Sir, I do not know that Campbell ever lied with pen and ink” (*Life* 1:417n5; 3:244)—perhaps because Johnson saw Campbell’s behavior as an exception. In general, a “medium” such as a poker chip, or a token instead of actual money, increases dishonesty. Think of electronic transfers and money laundering, or collateralized debt obligations! The rule of thumb is that the more complex a financial instrument is, the greater the chance of double-dealing, chicanery, and fraud, even on massive scales. Experience bears this out.

Ariely notes that cheating by a little bit is common. People seem to mark the degree rather than the kind, a slope that Johnson found truly slippery, and hence his diligence against any form of untruth. Interestingly, in one experiment Ariely reports that subjects in a test, after trying to recall all of the Ten Commandments—whether all or only a few could be remembered—did not cheat. This moral reminder was a brake on cheating. Rules, icons, and codes are vital; they reduce cheating and lying. Honor codes have some positive effect. However, a vow to one’s self seems to have less force than a vow to another or to a group of witnesses. (This says something about Johnson’s constant resolutions expressed only to himself.) Nevertheless, vows and promises, and especially open confession do help if done sincerely. These provide what Ariely calls a new starting point. There is a reset, and Johnson often reset his reset.

“14 Ways You’re Being Lied to Every Single Day” by Amanda Scherker offers a good summary for the layperson of various studies

¹⁰ Dan Ariely, *The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves* (2012).

of telling lies and their kinds.¹¹ A University of Massachusetts at Amherst study concluded that emails contain three times the number of lies and exaggerations as direct personal conversations.¹² From the abstract, rather chillingly: "it may be *normative* to distort reality online" (emphasis added). A Cornell study revealed that on LinkedIn, the typical CV of college-aged individuals applying for a job contains about three lies, and 92% contain at least one. Because LinkedIn is public, though, it seems that the deceptions in CVs posted there have less to do with work history, which can be more easily verified.¹³ A study at the University of Toronto found that only 20% of two-year olds were capable of lying, but 90% of four-year olds would do it.¹⁴ The abstract begins, "Lying is common among adults and a more complex issue in children." Below, we'll hear how Johnson would correct even small errors in a child's report. Another study determined that 84% of US parents and 98% in China lie to their children in order to get them to behave. Shockingly, the lie most commonly used in both nations is falsely to threaten the child with being left alone in a public place if the child does not follow the parent. This threat of abandonment, about the worst a parent can do short of sexual or physical abuse, may betray deep fears of parents themselves.¹⁵ Families are a tricky place for lies, which can be short-lived or last a lifetime. Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* finally does a good job of stating what has governed his family a long time: "Mendacity." *The Huffington Post* article reports that another Cornell study shows "Text messaging is pretty much a cesspool of mendacity." One in ten messages, however short, contains a lie or is a lie, many of the type that researchers still call "butler lies."¹⁶

We have seen how Johnson abhorred lies told by a doctor to a patient and that he claimed this had "frequently" been practiced on him. In one recent survey covering a period of twelve months only, 11% of doctors admitted they had lied to a patient or to a patient's parent or guardian; 20% of doctors surveyed said that, fearing a

11 Amanda Scherker, "14 Ways You're Being Lied to Every Single Day," *The Huffington Post*, Posted 06/23/2014, Updated 06/25/2014

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/23/your-e-being-liedto_n_5489342.html?page_version=legacy&view=print&comm_ref=false.

12 Mattitiah Zimble and Robert S. Feldman, "Liar, Liar, Hard Drive on Fire: How Media Context Affects Lying Behavior," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 41:10 (October 2011): 2492-2507.

13 Jamie Guillory and Jeffrey T. Hancock, "The Effect of LinkedIn on Deception in Resumes," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15:3 (March 2012): 135-40.

14 Kang Lee, "Little Liars: Development of Verbal [*sic*, for Oral] Deception in Children," *Child Development Perspectives* 7:2 (June 2013): 91-96.

15 Gail D. Heyman, Anna S. Hsu, Genyue Fu, and Kang Lee, "Instrumental Lying by Parents in the US and China," *International Journal of Psychology* 48:6 (2013): 1176-84.

16 Stacey Shackford, "People Lie as a Way to Manage Modern Communications," *Cornell Chronicle*, 20 December 2010. Professors Jeff Hancock and Jeremy Birnholtz conducted the study reported in this article.

lawsuit, they had covered up one of their own medical mistakes, that is, lied about what they had done.¹⁷ Recall Johnson saying that friendship is not always conducive to honesty (see above)? That is true, but being a stranger is worse. In a University of Massachusetts study, 60% of subjects lied to a stranger within ten minutes. Strangers in a single conversation would tell each other two to three lies. Women would lie more often to make others feel good or to protect others, men to aggrandize themselves.¹⁸ Interestingly, this confirms Johnson's observation about lies of vanity, which he connects with men, and laxity of narration, which he connects more with women. This may be well known to married couples: in one survey half of all spouses, male and female, admitted that they had lied to their partner about a recent purchase. More than 30% of spouses seem untrustworthy when it comes to handling combined finances. Women are almost 50% more likely to claim that men are dishonest about finances than the other way around, and research has found that this disproportion accurately mirrors events.¹⁹

With regard to self-deception, a Harvard Business School study confirmed that we routinely rationalize lying to ourselves. People who take a test and cheat will often give as a reason for their high score their high intelligence or knowledge. The study states, "People understand they will deceive, but fail to perceive the process by which that deception leads to self-deception." Moreover, "factors that reinforce the benefits of cheating *enhance* self-deception."²⁰

9. Lies that Disarm their own Force; A Hundred Lies

This recognized category in Johnson might quickly be grasped by reminding readers of the boy who cried wolf. In the following wide-ranging and complex conversation about truth and lies, history and

17 "Some Physicians Not Always Honest with Patients, Health Affairs Study Reports," 8 February 2012. See Lisa I. Iezzoni, Sowmya R. Rao, Catherine M. DesRoches, Christine Vogeli, and Eric G. Campbell, "Survey Shows That at Least Some Physicians Are Not Always Open or Honest with Patients," *Health Affairs* 31:2 (February 2012): 383-91.

18 Robert S. Feldman published this study in 2002 in the *Journal of Basic and Applied Social Psychology*. See "UMass Amherst Researcher Finds Most People Lie in Everyday Conversation (June 10, 2001):

<http://www.umass.edu/newsoffice/article/umass-amherst-researcher-finds-most-people-lie-everyday-conversation>. That article quotes

Feldman: "When they were watching themselves on videotape, people found themselves lying *much more* than they thought they had" (emphasis added).

19 "Three in 10 Americans Admit to Financial Deception with Partners," National Endowment for Financial Education (14 January 2011) at <http://www.nefe.org/press-room/news/admitting-to-financial-deceptions.aspx>.

20 Zoë Chance, Michael I. Norton, Francesca Gino, and Dan Ariely, "Temporal View of the Costs and Benefits of Self-Deception," PNAS, approved 28 January 2011, at <http://faculty.som.yale.edu/zoechance/documents/ZChancepaper3-PNAS2011-Self-deception.pdf> (emphasis added).

history, writing (parts of which have been omitted to highlight the points about lying), lies that disarm their own force surface after a discussion in which Johnson advocates prudence on the part of a foreigner pursuing closely the truth of the present state of another nation and its politics. The conversation took place on 15 April 1773.

An animated debate took place whether [Vincenzio] Martinelli should continue his History of England [published 1770-73] to the present day. . . . JOHNSON. "No, Sir; he would give great offence. He would have to tell of almost all the living great what they do not wish told." GOLDSMITH. "It may, perhaps, be necessary for a native to be more cautious; but a foreigner who comes among us without prejudice, may be considered as holding the place of a Judge, and may speak his mind freely. . . . [H]e wants only to sell his history, and to tell truth; one an honest, the other a laudable motive." JOHNSON. "Sir, they are both laudable motives. It is laudable in a man to wish to live by his labours; but he should write so as he may *live* by them, not so as he may be knocked on the head. I would advise him to be at Calais before he publishes his history of the present age. . . ." GOLDSMITH. "There are people who tell a hundred political lies every day, and are not hurt by it. Surely, then, one may tell truth with safety." JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, in the first place, he who tells a hundred lies has disarmed the force of his lies. [*Adventurer* 50 begins, "When Aristotle was once asked, what a man could gain by uttering falsehoods; he replied, 'Not to be credited when he shall tell the truth.'"] But besides; a man had rather have a hundred lies told of him, than one truth which he does not wish should be told." (*Life* 2:221-22)

Goldsmith goes on to advocate telling the truth at all costs in order to "shame the devil," but Johnson, while eager enough to do the same, advises to be out of reach of the devil's claws. Goldsmith replies that the shield of truth will prevent harm.

B. Lies Permitted, even Demanded

10. A Consecrated Lie Contrasted with Inexcusable Lies

A lie for Johnson is "consecrated" if told for moral purposes concerning matters of virtue and when what it conveys "*should*" or

ought to be regarded as true. A consecrated lie is not true but it is excusable, perhaps laudable. Boswell is remarking that in 1760 Johnson seemed to have an intention of "writing a history of the recent and wonderful successes of the British arms in all quarters of the globe," and that "How much is it to be regretted that this intention was not fulfilled" (*Life* 1:354-55). Johnson would not have been so laudatory of British actions, and Boswell is perhaps indulging in some jingoism. Nevertheless, he says that if Johnson were to write such a history,

He would have been under no temptation to deviate in any degree from truth, which he held very sacred, or to take a licence, which a learned divine told me he once seemed, in a conversation, jocularly to allow to historians.

"There are (said he [Johnson]) inexcusable lies, and consecrated lies. For instance, we are told that on the arrival of the news of the unfortunate battle of Fontenoy, every heart beat, and every eye was in tears. Now we know that no man eat his dinner the worse, but there *should* have been all this concern; and to say there was, (smiling) may be reckoned a consecrated lie." (*Life* 1:355)

(L. F. Powell noted, "A learned divine' was substituted in proof for 'Dr. Maclean at the Hague'" [1:355n].) It is interesting that the idea of a consecrated lie Johnson should relate to a "learned divine" and that he was "smiling" as he characterized the misreport as a "consecrated lie." How are we to take this, and the fact that Johnson "seemed" to allow this leeway to historians, and to do so "jocularly"? It may be that political motives come into play again. And the possibility that Johnson was only half-serious cannot be discounted, that he was only talking about it and would not commit such a consecrated lie himself. Yet, he might see this leeway allowed to an historian to be near the truth, a white lie of sorts, and in the well-intentioned service of virtue: "there *should* have been all this concern." The emphasis is in the original.

11. Leeway for "the writer of an epitaph" or "lapidary inscriptions"

This permission to deviate from strict truth is well known in Johnson studies and may be treated briskly, though it is not as simple as it may seem. "The writer of an epitaph should not be

considered as saying nothing but what is strictly true. Allowance must be made for some degree of exaggerated praise. In lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath” (*Life* 2:407). This pronouncement about lapidary inscriptions is so important that Boswell mentions it twice (*Life* 2:407; 3:387). And we have an additional, though qualified, reminder from Johnson’s *Essay on Epitaphs*: “Though a sepulchral inscription is professedly a panegyric, and, therefore, not confined to historical impartiality, yet it ought always to be written with regard to truth. No man ought to be commended for virtues which he never possessed, but whoever is curious to know his faults must inquire after them in other places.” (*Life* 2:407n2, which quotes Johnson’s *Essay on Epitaphs*.) That is to say, virtue cannot be attributed where it did not exist, though faults may be overlooked or touched upon lightly. This is actually a matter of telling the truth (not lying), but not telling the whole truth. It is important to realize that Johnson is not advocating untruths. Rather, he is not censuring omissions. Why? Because there is an element of forgiveness or generosity, of mercy for the fact that life is now over and that the final judge of faults is not a mortal judge. Additionally, in the *Essay on Epitaphs* he stresses that the purpose of this kind of writing is “to perpetuate the examples of virtue.” Whatever an epitaph states “ought always to be written with regard to truth.”²¹

12. Lies Culturally Accepted, even Expected

It may surprise many that given certain cultural circumstances Johnson not only permits a kind of dishonesty that clearly stems from commission rather than omission, he even refuses to call it dishonesty. In the context of gambling he says, “It must be considered that a man who only does what every one of the society to which he belongs would do is not a dishonest man. In the republic of Sparta it was agreed that stealing was not dishonorable if not discovered. I do not commend a society where there is an agreement that what would not otherwise be fair shall be fair; but I maintain that an individual of any society who practices what is allowed is not a dishonest man.” This does not mean, of course, that Johnson approves of stealing, and he casts doubt on gaming: “I do not call a gamester a dishonest man; but I call him an unsocial man, an unprofitable man. Gaming is a mode of transferring property without producing any intermediate good. Trade gives employment to numbers, and so produces intermediate good”

²¹ *An Essay on Epitaphs*, par. 6.

(*Life* 2:176; stealing in Sparta crops up again at 3:293). This is the complaint about certain kinds of finance, that its instruments do not produce anything or even manage risk; they merely become modes of gaming.

In time and space Sparta is distant. Let’s look closer. The Chiricahua Apache raided and took what they needed; it was accepted among them, in part because Mexicans and American white men stole from them first. As one modern Apache descendant remarked, referring to the killing and stealing done by his people, “We did it back to them, only better” (American Experience, the film *We Shall Remain*, “Geronimo,” 2009). We admire Geronimo enough to have his name enter English as a cry and byword, and as the code name for the operation that executed a terrorist who had killed thousands of our tribe. It depends where one draws the tribe’s borders. Fine English and Scottish—and American—families have ancestors who stole from and killed each other in gang warfare along the borders, the Marches of Scotland and England. Sir Walter Scott mused that his forebears were among them.

Johnson’s larger point is that any society or culture countenances a certain lack of honesty; in what that dishonesty consists depends in part on social norms. Henry David Thoreau devised a method of measuring cordwood more accurately than common practice. It was rejected because too accurate; wood sellers in Charlestown, Massachusetts, preferred their older method, which permitted more leeway and let them cheat a little.

13. Lies of Moral Obligation or of a Prior Promise

Late in Johnson’s life (13 June 1783), Boswell reports, “We talked of the casuistical question, Whether it was allowable at any time to depart from *Truth*? JOHNSON. ‘The general rule is, that Truth should never be violated, because it is of the utmost importance to the comfort of life, that we should have a full security by mutual faith. . . . There must, however, be some exceptions. If, for instance, a murderer should ask you which way a man is gone, you may tell him what is not true, because you are under a previous obligation not to betray a man to a murderer.’ ” This seems clear enough, and it would be a strange moralist to argue otherwise. Boswell then alters the terrain and inquires, “‘Supposing the person who wrote *Junius* were asked whether he was the authour, might he deny it?’ JOHNSON. ‘I don’t know what to say to this. If you were *sure* that he wrote *Junius*, would you, if he denied it, think as well of him afterwards? Yet it may be urged, that what a man has no right to ask, you may refuse to communicate; and there is no other effectual

mode of preserving a secret, and an important secret, the discovery of which may be very hurtful to you, but a flat denial; for if you are silent, or hesitate, or evade, it will be held equivalent to a confession. But stay, Sir; here is another case. Supposing the authour had told me confidentially that he had written *Junius*, and I were asked if he had, I should hold myself at liberty to deny it, as being under a previous promise, express or implied, to conceal it. Now what I ought to do for the authour, may I not do for myself?" (*Life* 4:305-06). The key word is "confidentially," which implies that Johnson, while holding to a high standard of truth telling, makes ample room for promises of confidentiality. In fact, those promises trump truth, for "I *ought*" to conceal what I have come to know through an understood confidence.

C. All Are Fallible and the Fragility of Truth

Johnson's attitude to lies assumes a rigorous standard. Yet, as he remarks, "Few have all kinds of merit belonging to their character. We must not examine matters too deeply—No, Sir, a *fallible being will fail somewhere*" (2:132, original emphasis). He understands the fallibility of human nature and embraces at once its inherent corruption and the necessity of forgiveness. "To resist temptation once, is not a sufficient proof of honesty. If a servant, indeed, were to resist the continued temptation of silver lying in a window, as some people let it lye, when he is sure his master does not know how much there is of it, he would give a strong proof of honesty." However (similar to "what a man has no right to ask" in discussing permitted lies above), he quickly adds, "But this is a proof to which you have no right to put a man. You know, humanly speaking, there is a certain degree of temptation which will overcome any virtue. Now, in so far as you approach temptation to a man, you do him an injury; and, if he is overcome, you share his guilt" (*Life* 3:237). As he notes of all scholars, "Some deficiency must be forgiven all, because all are men." Although setting a high standard and having "perfection in our eye," he paradoxically insists that we cannot expect to obtain it, especially when temptations call. Still, he holds to a high standard, "that we may always advance towards it, though we know it never can be reached" (*Adventurer* 85, Yale 2:416-17). If there is such a thing—and I believe there is—Johnson is a flexible absolutist. This attitude perhaps rubbed off on Boswell. At the beginning of the *Life*, he states, "*I must be allowed to suggest, that the nature of the work . . . as it consists of innumerable detached particulars, all which, even the most minute, I have spared no pains to ascertain with a scrupulous authenticity, has occasioned*

a degree of trouble far beyond that of any other species of composition" (*Life* 1:6-7).

"The heart naturally loves truth" (*Life of Pope*, discussing *Eloisa to Abelard*, Yale 23:1209). This is one of the simplest, shortest sentences Johnson wrote. As a counterbalance, he urges that truth is, in fact, not easily defended and can never be counted on to prevail. A person may be free of lies and guilt, but such a state is insecure and vulnerable. (The Preface to Shakespeare speaks of "the stability of truth," but that is Shakespeare's representation of the whole of life, which includes the fragility of truth, as almost every play, for example, *Othello*, exhibits.) Others will tell lies, gossip, or accuse, and it is always the delight of some to undercut the virtue of others. The Solicitor-General of Scotland, Mr. Murray, resisted this view, as Goldsmith did by claiming that the devil was no match for the truth (see above). Murray protested, "But, sir, truth will always bear examination." Johnson replied, "Yes, sir, but it is painful to be forced to defend it. Consider, sir, how should you like, though conscious of your innocence, to be tried before a jury for a capital crime once a week?" (*Life* 3:11-12).

Foreshadowing Coleridge's characterization of Iago's "motiveless malignity," Johnson talks about "vanity . . . incited to fiction" in a "race of liars . . . whose pride is to deceive others without any gain or glory to themselves. Of this tribe it is the supreme pleasure to remark a lady in the play-house or the park, and to publish, under the character of a man suddenly enamoured, an advertisement in the news of the next day, containing a minute description of her person and her dress. From this artifice, indeed, no other effect can be expected than perturbations which the writer can never see, and conjectures of which he can never be informed. Some mischief, however, he hopes he has done. . . . He may for several days keep a wife in terror for her husband, or a mother for her son; and please himself with reflecting, that by his abilities and address, some addition is made to the miseries of life" (*Adventurer* 50, Yale 2:365-66). Not only Iago, but also the situation of Jonas Chuzzlewit and his young bride fit this description, Jonas intending to take out a life insurance policy on her without her knowledge, legal in England until the mid-nineteenth century (Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, chapters 27 and 28). Truth is fragile; lies, insinuations, and half-truths are the preferred tools used to destroy the reputations of whistle blowers. Regard the suicide of Gary Webb, if that's what it was (he was shot *twice* in the head in the manner a professional assassin would employ). Webb, a journalist, had pried open, almost a decade after the fact, the CIA drug-selling connection involved with the Iran Contra affair, a connection that fuelled a crack epidemic and resulting crime

wave in south Los Angeles. This tale of fragile, vulnerable, and ignored truth is popularly but accurately presented in the film aptly named *Kill the Messenger* (2014).

A Warning to Writers and Scholars

Because Johnson felt scholars and writers incurred a special responsibility to avoid lies, his anger at speculation or “visionary” schemes of morality, such as that propounded by Soame Jenyns, was especially heated. This helps explain his ire and aggression toward James Macpherson as a species of liar, a dishonest author. If one counters that Johnson was not so honest about Scotland, this is incorrect. His honesty about Scotland is far greater than usually assumed.²² In the essay “On the Character and Duty of an Academick” attributed to Johnson, he remarks, “Ignorance in other men may be censured as idleness, in an academick it must be abhorred as treachery.” The duty of an academic is clear: “the academic is the depositary of the public faith, it is required of him to be always able to prove what he asserts.”²³ *Adventurer* 85 is equally forceful on temptations a scholar should avoid: “it can scarcely be conceived, how frequently in these extemporaneous controversies . . . mistaken ingenuity will weave artful fallacies, which reason can scarcely find means to disentangle” (Yale 2:415).

One of Johnson’s sermons, Sermon 8, is devoted to the dangers that ensnare a life of learning. This sermon, parts of the *Dunciad*, and that section of Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning* known as the “Vanities of Learning” might be read more often with the object of their admonitions in view. Since this sermon is not much quoted, it seems fit to cite it more fully:

And the sin to which we [scholars] are particularly tempted may be of that insidious and seductive kind, as, that without alarming us by the horrors of its appearance, and shocking us with the enormity of any single acts, may, by slow advances, possess the soul, and in destroying us differ only from the atrociousness of more apparent wickedness, as a lingering poison differs from the sword; more difficultly avoided, and more certainly fatal.

²² See James Engell, “Johnson and Scott, England and Scotland, Boswell, Lockhart, and Croker,” in *Samuel Johnson: New Contexts for a New Century*, ed. Howard Weinbrot (Huntington Library, 2014), 313-42, at 317-19.

²³ Samuel Johnson, “On the Character and

Duty of an Academick,” with an Introduction by Robert DeMaria, Jr. (Jerry Kelly for The Johnsonians, 2000), 13, quoting John Moir, *Hospitality . . . to which is appended . . . On the Character and Duty of an Academick* (1793), 43.

To temptations of this subtle insinuating kind, the life of men of learning seems above all others to be exposed. As they are themselves appointed the teachers of others, they very rarely have the dangers of their own state set before them . . . they are willingly persuaded to believe, that because they are at a great distance from the rocks on which conscience is most frequently wrecked, that therefore they sail with safety. . . . The crimes, from which they are in danger, are not those . . . against which, the invectives of moral or theological writers have generally been directed; and therefore they are suffered to approach unregarded, to gain ground imperceptibly upon minds directed to different views . . . where perhaps they are scarcely discovered ’till they are past eradication.

To these causes, or to some of these, it must surely be imputed, that learning is found so frequently to fail in the direction of life; and to operate so faintly and uncertainly in the regulation of their conduct, who are most celebrated for their application and proficiency. They have been betrayed, by some false security, to withhold their attention from their own lives; they have grown knowing, without growing virtuous; and have failed of the wisdom which is the gift of the Father of lights, because they have thought it unnecessary to seek it, with that anxiety and importunity, to which only it is granted; they have trusted to their own powers, and were “wise in their own conceits.” (*Sermons*, ed. Jean Hagstrum and James Gray, Yale 14:86-88; the quoted allusion is to Romans 12:16.)

Why Be a Johnsonian?

Earlier we noted that children seem to learn to lie between the ages of two and four. Of this learned ability Johnson seems acutely aware: He “gave a very earnest recommendation of what he himself practised with the utmost conscientiousness: I mean a strict attention to truth, even in the most minute particulars. ‘Accustom your children (said he) constantly to this; if a thing happened at one window, and they, when relating it, say that it happened at another, do not let it pass, but instantly check them; you do not know where deviation from truth will end.’” Mrs. Thrale, “whose fancy was,” according to Boswell, “impatient of the rein, fidgeted at this, and

ventured to say, 'Nay, this is too much. If Mr. Johnson should forbid me to "drink tea, I would comply, as I should feel the restraint only twice a day; but little variations in narrative must happen a thousand times a day, if one is not perpetually watching.' JOHNSON. 'Well, Madam, and you *ought* to be perpetually watching. It is more from carelessness about truth than from intentional lying, that there is so much falsehood in the world' (*Life* 3:228-29). In one of her copies of the *Life*, she subsequently marked this passage with a marginal line of emphasis from "Madam" to the end of the paragraph at "world" (Fletcher 2:443).

Boswell is at pains to stress that Johnson "was indeed so much impressed with the prevalence of falsehood, voluntary or unintentional, 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.' He inculcated upon all his friends the importance of perpetual vigilance against the slightest degrees of falsehood." As Reynolds observed to Boswell, "all who were of his *school* are distinguished for a love of truth and accuracy, which they would not have possessed in the same degree, if they had not been acquainted with Johnson" (*Life* 3:229-30).

Reviewing anything one says or writes can create unease, as if cancer were lurking undetected, or, worse, that psychologically one is unwilling to find it, or is blind to it. Or, that one could find it but for reasons of vanity or despondency or laziness one has not done so. It makes one alert, as if there were some original sin beneath the surface, a translucent surface at best, and that such a surface is one's own character. It creates, at least temporarily, a kind of "perpetual vigilance against the slightest degrees of falsehood," a vigilance colored by anxiety, perhaps punctuated by physical or mental tics or murmuring. At best it is like the mad Astronomer in *Rasselas*—often wise and humane yet potentially deluded, worst of all deluded concerning what he knows and what he can do (control the weather). It also means that one can find refuge, temporarily, in getting things right, in tamping down truth with efforts at certainty, say, in defining masses of words, all of them in the language, and relying on the best authors as authorities, or in making notes to the plays of a great poet whose texts are probably *the* most in need of editing in an entire literary tradition, a poet such as Shakespeare; and it makes one perhaps satisfied to compile a library catalogue or to transcribe the political speeches of others, or to gather information and record the lives of poets, "Written"—as Johnson noted in his Annals on Good Friday, 1779—"I hope in such a manner, as may tend to the promotion of piety," that is, duty to

truth, devotion to something higher. Awareness of the canker of ever-present falsehood noticed or unnoticed can also produce guilt, which in turn produces self-accusation, procrastination, and a feeling that one hasn't done enough. That same Good Friday 1779, despite now publishing the *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson declares that during the previous year he finds "little but dismal vacuity . . . much intended and little done" (Yale 1:294). In this predicament, it's important to have friends, to get out of one's self, to travel, to be social, to be at a dinner with friends, or in a stagecoach traveling rapidly and talking with an attractive, intelligent woman, all things Johnson enjoyed and valued.

There are many reasons to love Johnson, to return to his writing and to writing about him: his humor, often reaching truth obliquely and unexpectedly, his wisdom, his range of knowledge, his literary judgments (even when one disagrees). Johnson once caught Reynolds in an inadvertent falsehood. According to Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes*, "Reynolds said one day that nobody wore laced coats now; and that once everybody wore them. 'See now,' says Johnson, 'how absurd that is; as if the bulk of mankind consisted of fine gentlemen that came to him [to Reynolds] to sit for their pictures.'" Johnson could have stopped there. He had reminded Reynolds of the narrow circle of his elite clientele. But he goes further and injects Juvenalian satire: "If every man that wears a laced coat (that he can pay for) was extirpated, who would miss them?" (*Anecdotes* 1:253). Even here Johnson seems dealing reproof to his former self, for when *Irene* had its premiere years before in 1749, he desired some "'distinction of dress'" as the author of the play and sported a fancy "scarlet waistcoat with gold lace and a gold-laced hat."²⁴ Reynolds was not offended by Johnson's remark but instead, at another time, made the observation quoted above: "that all who were of his *school* are distinguished for a love of truth and accuracy, which they would not have possessed in the same degree if they had not been acquainted with Johnson." It seems not a bad reason, and perhaps the best among many good ones, to be a Johnsonian. Ultimately, it can free the human spirit. Perhaps this is why Johnson's biographer Jack Bate chose to begin one of the chapters of his earlier book, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson*, by stating, "Freedom is the harmony of the inner life with truth."²⁵

— JAMES ENGELL

²⁴ W. Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (1977), 265.

Samuel Johnson (1955), 129, beginning chapter IV, "The Stability of Truth."

²⁵ Walter Jackson Bate, *The Achievement of*