

Generous Minds

By Tyler Cowen

The Rambler. Volume 1, from The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 1969, Yale University Press.

A blogger by the ostensible name of “Samuel Johnson” has compiled his previous posts into a book, edited by a supposed W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss. But the true work here is “Johnson’s,” and the sequential editing, as such, seems to have been done by WordPress. The editorial illusion, of course, is a trick dating from the eighteenth century, as for instance Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope presented the work of an imaginary Martinus Scriblerus in the 1740s. These Johnson posts claim to date from the early 1750s, a typical blogger’s conceit and misdirection, but the content is too modern and innovative to sustain that illusion for long.

Cutting through the postmodern trappings, Johnson’s blog reflects his ongoing interest in behavioral economics. He is continually skirting the frontier of the latest research insights, although like many bloggers he is lax in providing the proper citations. He writes off the top of his head, though without care for what came before from Thomas Schelling, Jean Tirole, or Cass Sunstein, among other titans of the field. Reading these short pieces is thus a fascinating but often frustrating experience. And as is true for most of the work in behavioral economics, there are insights but a fully fleshed out model, applied consistently to all human choices, is nowhere to be found.

Yet it is the duty of the reviewer to impose some order on the material. I would start by noting that the pecuniary motive plays a small role in Johnson’s approach to behavior, as he assigns a more central role to the desire for pride and recognition. This is no surprise coming from a citizen of the web; to paraphrase an old saying, only a blockhead would attempt to blog for money.

In Johnson’s schema, most of all we want to feel good about ourselves, and we will overlook inconvenient information if need be. That is why so many things in the world go wrong. The social value of additional information about our performance is positive, but we so often treat the private value of that same information as negative – the truth will make us feel bad rather than

set us free -- and thus we discard knowledge. We don't want to know how badly we are doing, how imperfect our reputation is, and how far we are from truly valuable achievement. Unfortunately, Johnson doesn't seem familiar with the modeling techniques required to place that idea in a top economics journal.

Self-deception is a recurring theme in these blog posts (see for instance pp. 54-58). Flattery eggs us on, and damnation we dismiss, so it is hard for us to find the forums for receiving moderate and useful critical feedback, but packaged in pleasant enough ways for us to be willing to listen. Furthermore we need self-deception to support our motivations, which often are based in vanity. Self-confidence is the first requisite to great undertakings, and so this discussion is a contribution to principal-agent theory, again without regard to the formal literature.

Johnson stresses the importance of the expectational baseline for our well-being: "...for the good of our present state is merely comparative, and the evil which every man feels will be sufficient to disturb and harass him if he does not know how much he escapes." (p. 36) That too leads to a cognitive problem, as well as a social dysfunction. Individuals are risk-averse and seek to smooth out changes in their fortunes ("consumption smoothing"), but we learn more by experiencing a lot of variation in our circumstances. Through variation we see different sides of human existence and also receive more and better feedback from others; there are comparable issues in statistical sampling. For similar reasons, without some degree of misfortune, we even do not know our own feelings. Socrates didn't grasp just how hard it would be to "Know Thyself," to cite the classic Greek maxim, but Johnson's understanding here runs deep. Again, for behavioral reasons we end up pursuing paths of restricted knowledge and indeed foolishness, to the detriment of broader society and ourselves as well.

Johnson, in his not always convincing attempt to mimic archaic prose and examples, put the problem of external feedback this way: "Princes, when they would know the opinions or grievances of their subjects, find it necessary to steal away from their guards and attendants, and mingle on equal terms among the people." (pp. 36-37) Of course not many "princes" even try to do that, and the Secret Service has been a binding constraint for a long time. Bush 41, when he attempted to buy some milk from a grocery store in 1992, embarrassed himself by expressing surprise when the clerk scanned the item's bar code. Had Johnson added a few more contemporary examples of this kind, the argument would be easier to follow.

Across the blog posts reproduced in the middle part of this volume, Johnson lays out a complex theory of why humans are doomed to unhappiness and frustration. Ideally, what is best for our peace of mind (though not our dynamic learning) is a steady stream of positive experience, always just slightly better than our expectations. But it's difficult or impossible to manage that over time, if only because our expectations adjust. Worse yet, we are perpetually tempted by the prospect for larger gain, and we are susceptible to flattery, which pumps up our expectations of what is possible. The resulting quest for success and approval reintroduces risk and volatility into our lives. We cannot keep our performance ahead of our expectations and so mostly we are disappointed.

On top of these mechanisms, Johnson inserts the idea of zero- and negative-sum status competition at the social level (pp. 196-198). That means the winners from the competitive process end up making the lesser achievers feel worse, due to the nature of rivalry and envy. That argument is a nice try, but in fact it was outlined by Robert H. Frank several decades ago in his book *Choosing the Right Pond*, and it is not impressive to see it pulled out of the closet once again, without attribution for that matter.

When it comes to expected utility theory, however, Johnson is ahead of the curve. He shows how the demand to buy lottery tickets isn't mainly a question of the Friedman-Savage mechanism, or the independence axiom, but rather about the process of waiting to discover whether one has won or lost (pp. 187-191). We manipulate what the theorists call "the temporal resolution of uncertainty" to produce a more pleasant series of distractions, excitements, and suspenseful episodes than what our lives would serve up in the absence of those gambles. When it comes to insight on this topic, Johnson does better than the theorists of the 1980s (for example, Mark Machina), who tried to tackle these questions with equations but got bogged down in complexity and lost sight of the human element.

If there is an underlying theme to these posts, it is how readily we can end up in a series of "utility traps," as this reviewer would label them. Consider for instance this neat sentence: "Positive pleasure we cannot always obtain, and positive pain we often cannot remove." (p. 211) The Rambler blog puts forward an essentially tragic sense of the human condition, hidden somewhat by the energy of the writing and Johnson's personal optimism, which presumably is based on self-deception too.

Unfortunately, Johnson occasionally flirts with the views expressed in the more misogynistic corners of the blogosphere, as he denigrates the cognitive powers of attractive women. His graceful phrasing cannot conceal an underlying lack of judgment: “It may be observed, that the unvaried complaisance which ladies have the right of exacting, keeps them generally unskilled in human nature; prosperity will always enjoy the female prerogatives, and therefore must be always in danger of female ignorance. Truth is scarcely to be heard but by those from whom it can serve no interest to conceal it.” For all the offensiveness of this observation in toto, at least the last sentence is right on the mark.

Johnson is preoccupied with the flame wars and damnations of social media, and the reader senses – from the above passage among others – he probably has been the repeated victim of attacks. Indeed his damaged reputation may explain why this reviewer cannot find any recent reviews of the volume under consideration.

Johnson’s portrait of flame wars also draws on behavioral economics and he portrays the Twittersphere as composed of “Roarers, Whisperers, and Moderators.” Here goes:

The Roarer is an enemy rather terrible than dangerous. He has no other qualifications for a champion of controversy than a hardened front and strong voice. Having seldom so much desire to confute as to silence, he depends rather upon vociferation than argument, and has very little care to adjust one part of his accusation to another, to preserve decency in his language, or probability in his narrative. He has always a store of reproachful epithets and contemptuous appellations, ready to be produced as occasion may require, which by constant use he pours out with resistless volubility. (p. 5)

But that’s not the main problem: “The Whisperer is more dangerous. He easily gains attention by a soft address, and excites curiosity by an air of importance. As secrets are not to be made cheap by promiscuous publication, he calls a select audience about him, and gratifies their vanity by an appearance of trust by communicating his intelligence in a low voice.” (p.6)

Sadly, the best a successful blogger can hope for is to be ignored by others in the discourse, namely “His enemies may indulge their pride by airy negligence, and gratify their malice by quiet neutrality.” (p.13) So perhaps Johnson is tolerant of being mostly ignored today, though for the worse, this reviewer would claim.

Ultimately what makes this volume work, and add up to more than just a series of insightful blog posts, is Johnson's own temperament, both inquiring and restless. He wrote, "Curiosity is, in great and generous minds, the first passion and the last... He who easily comprehends all that is before him, and soon exhausts any single subject, is always eager for new enquiries; and in proportion as the intellectual eye takes in a wider prospect, it must be gratified with variety by more rapid flights, and bolder excursions." I suspect that by the phrase "great and generous minds" he meant his own and rightfully so.

As a final point, it is not clear why Johnson's titled his blog "The Rambler." A name which has been used several times. "The New Rambler" would have been more appropriate, better for marketing, and perhaps also superior for search engine optimization.

By the way, if you can't afford [the Amazon list price of \\$178 for the complete Rambler](#), you can still google to the original versions of these posts, try "Samuel Johnson Rambler." And I've covered only the first volume of three; Johnson blogged for more years yet. Great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance.

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