

Self-Deception

Samuel Johnson

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), immortalized by his famous biographer, James Boswell, was one of the most prominent figures of eighteenth-century English intellectual life. He wrote essays, novels, biographies, political tracts, a dictionary, and poetry, all in a scintillating style.

Johnson examines the devices of self-deceivers. One device they use is to congratulate themselves on a single act of generosity, thereby conferring on themselves the attribute “compassionate” or “generous,” even though the vast majority of their actions are mean and self-serving. Or they may praise goodness verbally, and thereby deceive themselves into thinking they are good. Still another device is to appear virtuous by dwelling on the evils of others. Self-deceivers will try to keep their distance from people who truly know what they are like, preferring the company of those who won’t expose them to themselves. And they avoid “self-communion.”

One sophism by which men persuade themselves that they have those virtues which they really want, 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 heroick 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.

As a glass which magnifies objects by the approach of one end to the eye, lessens them by the application of the other, so vices are extenuated by the inversion of that fallacy, by which virtues are augmented. Those faults which we cannot conceal from our own notice, are considered, however frequent, not as habitual corruptions, or settled practices, but as casual failures, and single lapses. A man who has, from year to year, set his country to sale, either for the gratification of his ambition or resentment, confesses that the heat of party now and then betrays the severest virtue to measures that cannot be seriously defended. He that spends his days and nights in riot and debauchery, owns that his passions oftentimes overpower his resolution. But each comforts himself that his faults are not without precedent, for the best and the wisest men have given way to the violence of sudden temptations.

There are men who always confound the praise of goodness with the practice, and who believe themselves mild and moderate, charitable and faithful, because

SELF-DECEPTION From *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 1, “The Rambler” no. 29 (June 23, 1750).

ain.
ts of hypocrisy? Why or
them “weary and defeated”?

efits the righteous indignation of
e of the sublimities of Dante’s
t concepts.

they have exerted their eloquence in commendation of mildness, fidelity, and other virtues. This is an error almost universal among those that converse much with dependents, with such whose fear or interest disposes them to a seeming reverence for any declamation, however enthusiastick, and submission to any boast, however arrogant. Having none to recall their attention to their lives, they rate themselves by the goodness of their opinions, and forget how much more easily men may shew their virtue in their talk than in their actions.

The tribe is likewise very numerous of those who regulate their lives, not by the standard of religion, but the measure of other men's virtue; who lull their own remorse with the remembrance of crimes more atrocious than their own, and seem to believe that they are not bad while another can be found worse.

For escaping these and a thousand other deceits, many expedients have been proposed. Some have recommended the frequent consultation of a wise friend, admitted to intimacy, and encouraged to sincerity. But this appears a remedy by no means adapted to general use: for in order to secure the virtue of one, it presupposes more virtue in two than will generally be found. In the first, such a desire of rectitude and amendment, as may incline him to hear his own accusation from the mouth of him whom he esteems, and by whom, therefore, he will always hope that his faults are not discovered; and in the second such zeal and honesty, as will make him content for his friend's advantage to lose his kindness.

A long life may be passed without finding a friend in whose understanding and virtue we can equally confide, and whose opinion we can value at once for its justness and sincerity. A weak man, however honest, is not qualified to judge. A man of the world, however penetrating, is not fit to counsel. Friends are often chosen for similitude of manners, and therefore each palliates the other's failings, because they are his own. Friends are tender and unwilling to give pain, or they are interested, and fearful to offend.

These objections have inclined others to advise, that he who would know himself, should consult his enemies, remember the reproaches that are vented to his face, and listen for the censures that are uttered in private. For his great business is to know his faults, and those malignity will discover, and resentment will reveal. But this precept may be often frustrated; for it seldom happens that rivals or opponents are suffered to come near enough to know our conduct with so much exactness as that conscience should allow and reflect the accusation. The charge of an enemy is often totally false, and commonly so mingled with falsehood, that the mind takes advantage from the failure of one part to discredit the rest, and never suffers any disturbance afterward from such partial reports.

Yet it seems that enemies have been always found by experience the most faithful monitors; for adversity has ever been considered as the state in which a man most easily becomes acquainted with himself, and this effect it must produce by withdrawing flatterers, whose business it is to hide our weaknesses from us, or by giving loose to malice, and licence to reproach; or at least by cutting of those pleasures which called us away from meditation on our conduct, and repressing that pride which too easily persuades us, that we merit whatever we enjoy.

Part of these benefits it is in every man's power to procure himself, by assigning proper portions of his life to the examination of the rest, and by putting himself frequently in such a situation by retirement and abstraction, as may weaken the

influence of ex
without its mel
out its perturb

The necess
survey of ourse
stick life; and i
state be not ex
tion of Valdess
asked, whether
sion, for no oth
tion between th

There are f
fears, from wh
place ourselves
their motives; t
there were no o
yet more awful,

STUDY QUESTIO

1. Self-deceivers
self-deception
2. What part do
3. Why does Joi
want to learn
4. What techniq
think of?

Upon Sel

Joseph Butler

Joseph B
gian. In
Fifteen
admired

Butler cit
sons can
condemn

UPON SELF-DECEIT FROM

of mildness, fidelity, and other those that converse much with es them to a seeming reverence ommission to any boast, however air lives, they rate themselves by ch more easily men may shew

o regulate their lives, not by the n's virtue; who lull their own ous than their own, and seem e found worse.

s, many expedients have been onsultation of a wise friend, But this appears a remedy by re the virtue of one, it presup- l. In the first, such a desire of his own accusation from the fore, he will always hope that eal and honesty, as will make ness.

in whose understanding and an value at once for its just- ot qualified to judge. A man Friends are often chosen for other's failings, because they pain, or they are interested,

t he who would know him- ches that are vented to his vate. For his great business and resentment will reveal. om happens that rivals or our conduct with so much e accusation. The charge of ed with falsehood, that the iscredit the rest, and never rts.

experience the most faith- the state in which a man effect it must produce by veaknesses from us, or by t by cutting of those plea- duct, and repressing that ver we enjoy. cure himself, by assigning t, and by putting himself tion, as may weaken the

influence of external objects. By this practice he may obtain the solitude of adversity without its melancholy, its instructions without its censures, and its sensibility without its perturbations.

The necessity of setting the world at a distance from us, when we are to take a survey of ourselves, has sent many from high stations to the severities of a monastic life; and indeed, every man deeply engaged in business, if all regard to another state be not extinguished, must have the conviction, tho', perhaps, not the resolution of Valdesso, who, when he solicited Charles the Fifth to dismiss him, being asked, whether he retired upon disgust, answered that he laid down his commission, for no other reason but because "there ought to be some time for sober reflection between the life of a soldier and his death."

There are few conditions which do not entangle us with sublunary hopes and fears, from which it is necessary to be at intervals disencumbered, that we may place ourselves in his presence who views effects in their causes, and actions in their motives; that we may, as Chillingworth expresses it, consider things as if there were no other beings in the world but God and ourselves; or, to use language yet more awful, "may commune with our own hearts, and be still."

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Self-deceivers are sometimes virtuous. How, in Johnson's opinion, does this aid in self-deception?
2. What part does self-deception play in our choice of friends?
3. Why does Johnson say that we should consult not our friends but our enemies if we want to learn about ourselves? Do you think he is right? Explain.
4. What techniques of self-deception does Johnson mention? What others can you think of?

Upon Self-Deceit

Joseph Butler

Joseph Butler (1692–1752) was an English moral philosopher and theologian. In 1738, he was made a bishop of the Church of England. Butler's *Fifteen Sermons*, from which the present selection is taken, are still admired for their style, acumen, and good sense.

Butler cites the example of King David to show how easily even good persons can deceive themselves. King David committed an injustice without condemning himself, but was morally outraged on hearing that someone

UPON SELF-DECEIT From *Fifteen Sermons upon Human Nature* by Joseph Butler (1726).