In the following chapter I shall argue that Johnson’s satire on man (especially in Rasselas) springs from the view that in human nature reason and passion, the angelic and the bestial, are intermixed in such a way as to modify both and make of them something strictly human. Human intelligence can never be angelic, nor is human passion ever completely animal. The fusion in man of contradictory tendencies makes his nature insufferable to him, and so he seeks to escape it by identifying himself with the idea of an uncompounded existence that is either above or below him. Man’s delusion that he can be nonhuman, an angel or a beast, is the supreme manifestation of his escapist, imaginative faculty. In this delusion lies the essence of human irrationality, pride, and folly.

Johnson’s attitude toward the idea of man as a middle link in a universal hierarchy of being is best summed up in a paradox. Despite his demonstration that the notion of a universal scale is logically untenable, contradicted by the facts of experience and itself a product of delusive Imagination, his satirical exposé of the human condition depends upon the traditional scheme which placed man between pure intelligence and pure bestiality, sharing characteristics with both but essentially belonging to neither. Like Swift,¹ we shall find Johnson fulfilling his function as a moralist by unmasking man’s futile attempt at pure and dispassionate reason (futile because human intelligence is and must be passionate), as well as by ridiculing the primitivist escapism that drives man to idealize nature and to seek the imaginary happiness of a savage or a beast—a happiness that is “imaginary” because the more a savage resembles a

¹ The present chapter is a revised version of an article which appeared in Scripta Hierosolymitana, XVII, 137–54. I have omitted the extended parallel drawn in that essay between Swift and Johnson since it is based on an interpretation of Swift that now seems to me too simplified.
beast the less he resembles a man. Both attempts, we shall see, ultimately come to the same thing in that they represent man's sinful reluctance to exert his human reason and so humbly face and accept his mixed nature.

Johnson's rejection of the idea of universal hierarchy in his review of Soame Jenyns's *Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757) is sufficiently well known not to require much elaboration. When the review first appeared in the *Literary Magazine*, it caused such a furor that Johnson was induced to reprint it in a separate small volume, a circumstance attributable not only to the brilliance of his attack but also to the extremely crucial nature of the topic at the time. His argument may be considered under two headings, the one purely philosophical and the other moral-religious, which between them illustrate the paradox I have indicated. The main criticism of the Great Chain of Being in the review—an argument which, as the late Arthur Lovejoy pointed out, "reached very nearly to the root of the matter"—is that the principle of nature's plenitude upon which the entire scheme of a universal ordered hierarchy rests (since the goodness of the Creator is manifest in his desire to "fill" the world by realizing all possible forms of existence, high and low) is not only at odds with observable facts but is self-contradictory as well. The chain of being was supposed to be a continuous or gradual progression from absolute nonexistence to absolute perfection of existence, but the very idea of such progression, Johnson points out, is unthinkable if one conceives of the universe as "full." The notions of plenitude and hierarchy contradict each other; hence a universe that is both is inconceivable. At each level there must be either a gap or an infinity of intermediate steps. "The highest being not infinite must be . . . at an infinite distance below infinity . . . and in this distance between finite and infinite, there will be room forever for an infinite series of indefinable existence." The same holds true at the bottom of the scale between the lowest form of existence and pure nonexistence. And, in fact, when one thinks of it more closely, "in

2 See *Works*, VI, 47 n. Pickering notes that this is "a circumstance which appears to have escaped Mr. Boswell's research."


the scale, wherever it begins or ends, are infinite vacuities. At whatever distance we suppose the next order of beings to be above man, there is room for an intermediate order of beings between them; and if for one order, then for infinite orders; since everything that admits of more or less, and consequently all the parts of that which admits them, may be infinitely divided." 5 Consequently, "no system can be more hypothetical than this, and, perhaps, no hypothesis more absurd." 6 The Great Chain of Being "cannot possibly have being." 7 By showing the way in which the idea of a full scale defies the law of contradiction, Johnson became the only eighteenth-century thinker to show conclusively the weakness of the conception on purely logical grounds.

But for an understanding of Johnson's own view of man's relation to the universe even more important than this exposé of logical inconsistency is the implication, present throughout the review, that the "scale of being is . . . raised by presumptuous imagination." 8 Like all metaphysical "speculation," the theodicy that bases itself on the conception of a universal chain represents for Johnson man's intellectual attempt to rise above himself, to ignore the limiting primacy of his concrete human existence, in which he must be involved to see himself and the world with whatever clarity is allowed him. It is an attempt to see with the eye of an angel or a god by ignoring the objections human reason raises to this single schematic explanation of the universe as to all others. Man's talk of a universal hierarchy is sinful. It is the product of "unprofitable enquiry" and "vain curiosity," 9 "presumptuous" in that it is a symptom of "speculative" human pride and "imaginary" in that it manifests the folly of turning away from what is observed by limited human reason. 10

5 Ibid., p. 53.
6 Ibid., p. 72.
7 Ibid., p. 52.
8 Ibid., p. 59.
9 Cf., Diaries, pp. 383-84 (entry for Aug. 12, 1784): "O Lord, my Maker and Protector, who hast graciously sent me into this world, to work out my salvation . . . while it shall please thee to continue me in this world where much is to be done and little to be known, teach me by thy Holy Spirit to withdraw my Mind from unprofitable and dangerous enquiries, from difficulties vainly curious, and doubts impossible to be solved."
10 Swift, in his "Digression Concerning the Original, the Use, and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth" (A Tale of a Tub, sec. IX), undertakes to discover "the faculty of soul" which is responsible for a mere mortal's "taking into
Johnson's criticism of the great chain is thus best understood in terms of the perennial butt of his satire—the tendency to "speculate" which is one of the ways in which man seeks to avoid a rational confrontation and acceptance of his limiting nature. The ridicule Johnson heaps on the facile metaphysics of Jenyns is of the same order as the irony Swift reserves for the flying astronomer-musicians of Laputa and, paradoxically, Pope himself for the impiously proud scientific "speculator" addressed in the Essay on Man:

Go wondrous creature: mount where Science guides,
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;
Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,
Correct old Time, and regulate the Sun,  

(Epistle, II, II. 19–22)

or for the "unconfined" Mad Mathesis of the Dunciad, who "to pure Space lifts her ecstatic stare" and "running round the circle finds it square" (IV, 33–34). All these superficially different cases of folly are castigated for what Johnson calls in the review "presumptuous imagination": the pride inherent in all man's intellectual attempts to break through human limitations and so become something that is above him in the great scale.

Johnson is like Swift in that he satirizes this intellectual pride by portraying a man who attempts to soar "into the Empyreal sphere" by literally flying. There is a farcical passage in the Second Book of Gulliver's Travels in which little Gulliver, attempting to leap over some Brobdingnagian cow dung, jumps short and finds himself "just in the middle up to [his] knees" (Chap. V). In the Third Book the image of man flying beyond humanity is used as the main satirical device, an eighteenth-century flying version of the traditional Ship of Fools, portrayed with a grotesquerie that rivals

his head to advance new systems, with such an eager zeal, in things agreed on all hands impossible to be known." Among other examples, he mentions Epicurus, who "modestly hoped that, one time or another, a certain fortuitous conourse of all men's opinions . . . would, by certain clinamina, unite in the notions of atoms and void," and Descartes, who "reckoned to see, before he died, the sentiments of all philosophers, like so many lesser stars in his tomantic system, wrapped and drawn within his own vortex." Such hopes for all-inclusive and absolute systems he calls imaginations, and accounts for their origin by the "phenomenon of vapours ascending from the lower faculties to overshadow the brain, and there distilling into conceptions, for which the narrowness of our mother-tongue has not yet assigned any other name beside madness or phrensy." Man's mad attempt at pure rationality, at what is above him, is thus shown with witty precision to originate in his lower faculties, and is therefore physiologically demonstrated to be a mark of bestiality.

Bosch in its curious mixture of delight, disgust, terror, and farce.\textsuperscript{12} But the point of the entire fantasy is precisely what we shall find at the core of Johnson's satire on man. The minds of the Laputans "are so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak nor attend to the discourses of others... [they are] so wrapped up in cogitation, that [they are] in manifest danger of falling down every precipice" (Chap. II). They wish to hear, do in fact hear, the music of the spheres—which, as the \textit{Essay on Man} has taught us, is much too "stunning" for mere mortal ears (I, 202). Like Mad Mathesis, they are mathematicians. Like the mad Astronomer whose pathetic story sums up the entire message of \textit{Rasselas}, they are obsessed with the motions of the heavenly bodies, which they calculate with such nicety that "it is in the power of [their] monarch to... prevent the falling of dews and rains whenever he pleases" (Chap. II). The Laputans, in short, are satirized for flying beyond the realm of the concretely human, of the "useful" which is the truly rational. One of their eyes turns inward, the other "directly up to the zenith (Chap. II); their inward-turning imagination is thus grotesquely coupled with the upward-turning presumption more generally ridiculed in the image of the flying island they inhabit.

This is precisely what is castigated in the "Dissertation on the Art of Flying" which forms the sixth chapter of \textit{Rasselas}. Johnson is certainly less intensely inventive of grotesque images than Swift (except for such passages as the powerful portrayal of Jenyns's "superior beings" amusing their leisure with "the tossings and contortions of every possible pain" in the review),\textsuperscript{13} but \textit{en revanche} his conception of human life is both more compassionate and more tragic (the mad Laputan monarch "prevents the falling of dews and rains" whereas Johnson's mad Astronomer is driven even madder by his anxiety that through some lapse he might neglect to make the rains fall in season). Johnson's flier, like the members of Swift's "academy of modern Bedlam" in the \textit{Tale of a Tub}\textsuperscript{14} or the projectors of Lagado in \textit{Gulliver's Travels},\textsuperscript{15} or indeed many of the

\textsuperscript{12} For a color reproduction of Bosch's "Ship of Fools," now in the Louvre, see C. Linfert, \textit{Hieronymus Bosch, The Paintings, Complete Edition} (London, 1959), Pl. 27.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Works}, VI, 65.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{A Tale of a Tub} (Everyman Library ed.; New York, 1909.), p. 106.
\textsuperscript{15} Bk. III, Chaps. v–vi. Both the Bedlam of the \textit{Tale of a Tub} and Lagado in \textit{Gulliver's Travels} are largely satires on the Royal Society and the canting pride of modern science in general.
virtuosi in the Fourth Book of the *Dunciad*, is "a man eminent for his knowledge of the mechanic powers," who "contrives engines." 16

It is made clear at the outset that his contraptions are quite "useful" in the twentieth-century utilitarian sense, but quite the reverse of "useful" in the word’s older, humanistic connotation. His "hope" of rising above the earth springs from his presumptuous belief that "the fields of air are open to knowledge [and that] only ignorance and idleness need crawl upon the ground" (p. 50). This statement is charged with the irony of its symbolic implications, since in speaking thus of "ignorance and idleness" he reveals his proud and sinful belief in human self-sufficiency. In speaking of "the fields of air" he may be referring to literal air, but Johnson means much more than a literal rising of the body from the ground. This becomes clear when the "artist" ecstasically contemplates "with what pleasure a philosopher, furnished with wings, and hovering in the sky, would see the earth, with all its inhabitants, rolling beneath him. . . . How must it amuse the pendent spectator to see the moving scene of land and ocean, cities, and deserts! To survey with equal security the marts of trade, and the fields of battle; mountains infested by barbarians, and fruitful regions gladdened by plenty and lulled by peace" (p. 51).

The language Johnson uses here is again charged with his irony: the flier would like to be a "pendent spectator," completely detached from real concern and involvement in the affairs of men—affairs which from his superior position would be seen as merely "amusing." From his imaginary vantage point, peace and war, civilization and savagery, would appear "equal" since he himself would be "secure."

In wishing to rise above the human he manifests the concentration upon Self which is the traditional root of theological Pride. He is criminally deficient in what Johnson found so disturbingly lacking in Jenyns’s work—real human commitment; the flier’s desire to rise into the "regions of speculation and tranquility" and survey the human scene "with equal security" results from his confusion of himself, the man, with a superior order of beings, himself with Pope’s divinity "who sees with equal eye, as God of all,/A hero perish or a sparrow fall." 17 It is no accident that

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16 *Rasselas*, chap. vi, p. 49.
Johnson uses the same image later on when exposing the "wise and happy" stoic of Chapter XVIII, who "from the unshaken throne of rational fortitude, looks down on the scenes of life changing beneath him" (p. 83).

Man's mad and futile attempt to become what is above him in the great scale ultimately is an offense against his human, rational dignity. His dream of a superhuman condition brings out the subhuman that is in him. The objection Rasselas raises against the project of flight is that "every animal has his element assigned him; the birds have the air, and man and beasts the earth" (p. 50). The flier answers that "fishes have the water, in which yet beasts can swim by nature, and men by art" and that flying is merely a kind of swimming in the air. He has "considered the structure of all volant animals and [found] the folding continuity of the bat's wings most easily accommodated to the human form." In other words, in order to "tower into the air beyond the malice and pursuit of man" and to become something higher than man in the scale of existence, he must imitate the animals who are below man in that scale; the fact that of all "volant animals" Johnson makes him choose the bat, a creature with definitely evil associations, as most "accommodated to the human form" is symbolically meaningful, for Johnson is here "arguing through images" no less than Swift or Pope with their spiders and other "vile" creatures. The point he is making is that man's attempt to escape from himself upwards or downwards in the great chain ultimately comes to the same thing.

What is implicit in the imagery of the "Dissertation on the Art of Flying" becomes entirely explicit in the unmasking of the stoic sage in Chapter XVIII. The chapter reflects the basic structure of the book as a whole and symmetrically repeats the pattern of other constituent episodes in the tale, in that escapist illusion is followed by the human reality which shows up its absurdity. The princess's dream of pastoral bliss is unmasked when she has to endure the company of some extremely unpleasant real shepherds. The flier's great plans are exposed when finally, leaping from his stand, he "in an instant dropped into the lake. His wings, which were of no use in the air, sustained him in the water, and the prince drew him to land, half dead with terror and vexation" (p. 53). In the stoic's case, Rasselas hears the impressive discourse of an impressive man. "His look was venerable, his action graceful, his pronunciation clear, and
his diction elegant." What he says seems at first to be traditional moral truth expressed in well-turned language, so impressive indeed that it needs someone less innocent than Rasselas to see through the cant and the clichés with which it is ridden. He "showed . . . that when fancy, the parent of passion, usurps the dominion of the mind, nothing ensues but the natural effect of unlawful government,—perturbation and confusion. . . . He compared reason to the sun, of which the light is constant, uniform, and lasting; and fancy to a meteor, of bright but transitory lustre, irregular in its motion, and delusive in its direction" (p. 82).

To a more practiced ear what is wrong with the man before all else is this logorrhea, which points to the split in his consciousness which makes possible pompous self-deception. He sees himself as not really affected by the human predicament and, therefore, denies its reality. This failure in itself sufficiently betrays what in the Essay on Man is called "reasoning pride" (I, 123). His basic message is stoical. He "displayed the happiness of those who had obtained the important victory, after which man is no longer the slave of fear, nor the fool of hope." The point is that only a purely spiritual or a purely bestial creature may be free of fear or hope; man by definition is not. In other words, man in his fallen state—the only state with which he is really familiar—must hover between the reason and the passion of which his compounded humanity consists. The stoic is really asserting human self-sufficiency and is denying both religion and morality when he claims that the "important victory" (quite an understatement, this important!) of Reason over Passion and its attendant Fancy is possible in the absolute sense and that "this happiness [is] in everyone's power" (p. 83). His blasphemous self-confidence and complacency spring from his blindness to the fact that man is a being who

With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
. . . hangs between.19

18 In "The Use of Stoical Doctrines in Rasselas, Chapter XVIII," Modern Language Notes, LXVIII (Nov., 1953), 439–47, Gwin J. Kolb shows in detail the parallels between the sage's speech and stoic and neo-stoic doctrines. He does not attempt to relate the eighteenth chapter to the pattern and theme of Rasselas nor to Johnson's thought in general.

Rasselas is all too ready to accept this "wise and happy" man's presumptuous nonsense for true wisdom. He "could not conceive how any man could reason so forcibly without feeling the cogency of his own arguments." The weight of moral meaning is here carried by the word "feeling." The stoic lacks precisely the quality Johnson found so conspicuously absent from Jenyns's theodicy, real commitment to one's humanity. Of Pope and Jennyns he had said that perhaps they "never saw the miseries which they imagine thus easy to be borne." In the stoic's case he illustrates the point concretely; Imlac tries to warn the naif that teachers of morality like the "wise and happy man" who has impressed him "discourse like angels, but . . . live like men," but Rasselas needs the test of reality to see through this latest of his illusions. When the philosopher's daughter dies the roles are subtly reversed and the unmasking is cruel and final. Rasselas tries to console the bereaved "happy man" with the wisdom he had so recently acquired from him, complacently mouthing the indubitable truth that "mortality is an event by which a man can never be surprised," but the poor stoic rebuffs him with the accusation that he speaks "like one who never felt the pangs of separation."

I do not think it has been noticed how closely Chapter XVIII of Rasselas parallels Leonato's grieving speech in Much Ado About Nothing (V.i.). In fact it seems to me not improbable that Shakespeare's passage provided inspiration for the episode. In the play, when Antonio seeks to console Leonato for Hero's dishonor (which to her father is equivalent to her death), Leonato's answer contains precisely the antistoical point Johnson makes through the death of his sage's daughter, and so deserves extensive quotation in this context. Leonato says:

I pray thee, cease thy counsel,  
Which falls into mine ears as profitless  
As water in a sieve; give not me counsel;  
Nor let no comforter delight mine ear  
But such a one whose wrongs do suit with mine.  
Bring me a father that so loved his child,  
Whose joy of her is overwhelmed like mine,  
And bid him speak of patience . . .  
If such a one will smile, and stroke his beard  
Bid sorrow wag, cry "hem" when he should groan,  
. . . I of him will gather patience.

PASSIONATE INTELLIGENCE

But there is no such man: for, brother, men
Can counsel and speak comfort to that grief
Which they themselves not feel; but, tasting it,
Their counsel turns to passion, which before
Would give perceptual medicine to rage,
Fetter strong madness in a silken thread,
Charm ache with air and agony with words:
No, no; 'tis all men's office to speak patience
To those that wring under the load of sorrow,
But no man's virtue nor sufficiency
To be so moral when he shall endure
The like himself. Therefore give me no counsel;
My griefs cry louder than advertisement.

ANTONIO: Therein do men from children nothing differ.
LEONATO: I pray thee, peace—I will be flesh and blood;
For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently,
However they have writ the style of gods
And made a push at chance and sufferance. (11. 4–38)

Stoic teaching is thus shown up as cant, as a manifestation of
the futile pride that will not stand the test of mortal—and therefore
passionate—nature. When Johnson's prince parts from the stoic sage,
he is "convinced of the emptiness of rhetorical sound, and the
inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences" (p. 84). He has
observed at first hand the sterility of the anti-logos which Pope
called in the Dunciad "the uncreating word" (IV, 653). Canting stoic
pride has been exposed as identical with the optimistic pride of the
Free Enquiry: a product of the imagination that leads man to behave
and think as if he were something more than a mere mortal in the
order of things. As Pascal, with whose moral thought Johnson's has
so much in common, put it: "Ce que les stoïques proposent est si
difficile et si vain!" 21

It should be added that Johnson's attitude toward stoicism is
not summed up in the satirical unmasking of its "studied sentences"
in Rasselas. Inasmuch as stoicism represented a declaration of
absolute human self-sufficiency, it offended Johnson's deepest
convictions, his very Christianity. But in fact Johnson's Christianity
itself has a traditionally stoical strain. Approving quotations from
classical Stoic writers abound in his writings22 and he was apt to
quote Epictetus in conversation as well.23 His defense of the stoic's

23 Life, V, 279.
anger as against the Epicurean’s calm in Lucian’s *Jupiter the Tragic* may be merely due to the fact that Lucian’s stoic hotly insists on the existence of a divinity whereas the Epicurean complacently denies it, but Johnson’s moral thought is in general deeply imbued with a kind of stoicism. Even the false sage in *Rasselas* seems at first to be presenting the typically Johnsonian doctrine of Reason and Imagination, and one does not have to read through many of the *Ramblers* and *Idlers*, or much of *Rasselas* for that matter, to find Johnson arguing for that other state of being in which the hopes and fears of the “choice of life” are left behind by means of a rational and virtuous disengagement from the senses, or arguing for a recognition that happiness does not depend on external circumstance since “the fountain of content must spring up in the mind.”

The Johnsonian ideal of a tranquil “Choice of Eternity” that is beyond both expectation and disappointment, freed from the tensions of boredom and entertainment, monotony and diversity, indolence and activity, habit and “novelty,” is Christian in that it ultimately refers to salvation, but it is stoical in the sense that it depends on a rational disengagement from the world. The difference lies in Johnson’s constant insistence that this detachment cannot (and indeed, as we have seen, *must* not) be completely achieved on earth by mere mortals. Again, his position is no different from Pascal’s: “[Les] Stoïques . . . concluent qu’on peut toujours ce qu’on peut quelquefois.”

This blend of Christian and Stoic, or rather this adaptation of the stoical to the Christian, appears most explicitly in the sixth *Rambler*. The essay opens with the total rejection of stoic precept that underlies the satirical treatment of it we have already encountered in *Rasselas*. “That lofty sect” was committing an “extravagance of philosophy” when it extended the doctrine “that man should never suffer his happiness to depend upon external circumstance” to “an utter exclusion of all corporal pain and pleasure from the regard or attention of a wise man.” This is irrational because “it is overthrown by the experience of every hour, and the powers of nature rise up against it.” As we have seen in *Rasselas*,

it does not stand the test of real, observable human life on earth. But though the stoic ideal is more appropriate to angels than to men, "we may very properly inquire, how near to this exalted state it is in our power to approach." "Absolute independence" is nonsense, but surely total dependence on the trivial objects of hope and fear which make up the mass of quotidian life is below the potential dignity of man, who, though fallen and depraved, still hopes for eternal bliss through a return to Grace. Ultimately, therefore, in Johnson's view of man's attempt to rise upward through rational detachment one must distinguish between, on the one hand, the stoic pride that is sinful, presumptuous, and imaginative in its absolute demand, and, on the other, the far from futile attempt to achieve a *human* dignity through the virtuous and religious concentration—inasmuch as it is within the power of frail man to do so—upon higher things.

We have seen how Jenyns's complacent, pseudo-philosophical optimism and the stoicism of irreligious detachment are exposed by Johnson as the attempts of imagination to escape upwards from man's inescapable condition. The Noble Savage myth represents the imagination's attempt to escape it downwards.

The idea that savage life was inherently superior to civilization, and the implication that man could live in a terrestrial paradise if only he could contrive to rid himself of the evil trappings of civilization, was reinforced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the accounts of travelers to distant lands. Pigafetta, who was in Brazil with Magellan, praised the natives for "following nature" and remarked that their freedom from all the European vices was rewarded with great longevity. Subsequent travelers found the "natural" life of non-Europeans equally admirable. 27 In the eighteenth century, Rousseau's ideas fell on fertile ground, since the notion of the "natural" state was commonly associated on both sides of the Channel with the state of unfallen man, free of the "reasoning pride" that was the bane of civilization. 28 Pope's Indian passage in the *Essay on Man* has a many-faceted, delicate irony, but its rebuke to "civilized" man is still its most obvious function:

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It is interesting to note that, in Johnson's violent rejection ("don't cant in defense of savages") of Boswell's suggestions that primitivist ideas might have some validity, the savage is frequently identified with a contemptuous reference to animals. When Boswell, evidently having read Bougainville's account of Tahitian prelapsarian happiness, claimed that "the people of Otaheite . . . have the art of navigation," Johnson curtly pointed out that "a dog . . . can swim." When Boswell insisted that "they carve very ingenioulsly," Johnson countered that "a cat can scratch, and a child with a nail can scratch." 31 The woman who had been living among the Indians and had to be compelled to return to civilization must have been "a speaking cat." 32 In other words, inasmuch as the savage lacks human reason and imagination his capabilities cannot possibly exceed those of other creatures lacking human reason and imagination, creatures below man in the scale of existence; whereas if he does not lack human reason he is no longer a savage. 33

The controlling image of what is above man and what is below him is no less present in Johnson's remarks on the Noble Savage delusion than in his treatment of the flier in Rasselas. When Boswell suggested in another conversation that "there might be some justice in the arguments for the superior happiness of the savage," Johnson's answer was, "Sir, there can be nothing more false. The savages have no bodily advantages beyond those of civilized man . . . and as to care or mental uneasiness, they are not above it, but below it, like bears." 34 Men must suffer the "mental uneasiness" of

30 Life, IV, 309.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., III, 246. Cf. Journey to the Hebrides, Life, V, 78: "A man of any intellectual attainment will not easily go [to America] and immerse himself and his posterity for ages in barbarism," and Rambler No. 6, Works, II, 27, where Cowley's avowed desire to retire "to some of our American plantations" is described as "chimerical."
33 Cf. Life, III, 49: Even the inhabitants of Otaheite and New Zealand are not in a state of "pure nature," since if they were they would be beasts, not men.
34 Life, II, 73. Cf. Rambler No. 128, Works, III, 108: "Every part of life has its uneasiness."
hopes and fears which mark their humanity; "dogs," "cats," and "bears" do not. Idealizations of savagery spring precisely from the human desire to be rid of the "uneasiness" which gives man a superiority over the beasts. Only man's cowardly unwillingness to confront rationally his mixed nature drives him to an identification with the unmixed existence that is below him in the great scale.

The "state of nature" of the primitivists is thus no less a hoax of the imagination than the benevolent Nature of deists and theodicists, which Johnson had defined in the *Dictionary* as "an imaginary being supposed to preside over the material and animal world." Johnson's own version of the "State of Nature" is close indeed to Hobbes's tough-minded conception. Like Hobbes, who maintained that in the State of Nature "the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have... no place, ... no arts; no letters; no society, and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," 35 Johnson believed man to be "naturally" immoral, at base a Yahoo: "We are all envious naturally... we are all thieves naturally... a child always tries to get at what it wants, the nearest way." 36 In another conversation he remarked: "Pity is not natural to man. Children are always cruel. Savages are always cruel. Pity is acquired and improved by the cultivation of reason." 37 Because the hardships of life in nature—the fact that it is all necessity and appetite—make all moral feeling a dangerous luxury, morality cannot be "natural": "had I been an Indian I must have starved, or they would have knocked me on the head, when they saw I could do nothing... a savage, when he is hungry, will not carry about with him a looby of nine years old, who cannot help himself. They have no affection, Sir." 38 In September, 1773, Johnson

35 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*, ed. H. Morley (London, 1885), chap. xiii, pp. 64-5. For Johnson, of course, Hobbism was hardly admirable. Of his enemy Hume, for example, he said that he "has no principle. If anything, he is a Hobbist" (*Life*, V, 272).

36 *Life*, III, 271. In a discussion at Paoli's concerning marriage the General maintained the primitivistic view that "in a state of nature a man and a woman uniting together would form a strong and constant affection, by the mutual pleasure each would receive." Johnson retorted that marriage "is so far from being natural... that we find all the motives which they have for remaining in that connection, and the restraints which civilized society imposes to prevent separation, are hardly sufficient to keep them together." *Life*, II, 165.


COSMIC HIERARCHY

wrote Mrs. Thrale about the island where he was "confined because of bad weather." The "heap of loose stones and turfs" leads him to comment that philosophers who think uncivilized life happy "believe it only while they are saying it." 39 They are guilty of cant in its most reprehensible form.

This is what Johnson meant when he said of Rousseau that "a man who talks nonsense so well, must know that he is talking nonsense." 40 But the nonsense was far from harmless. In preaching what Johnson rightly or wrongly considered total irrationalism, Rousseau was menacing religion, political order, individual morality, art, all human values. "Rousseau, Sir, is a very bad man. I would . . . sign a sentence for his transportation . . . I should like to have him work in the plantations." 41 The devastating satire on the Nature philosopher in Rasselas is specifically directed at Rousseau,42 who had described man in his uncorrupted state as "un être agissant toujours par des principes certains et invariables," a creature possessing

40 Life, II, 74. In 1776 Johnson found Lord Monboddo’s eccentric primitivism even more absurd than Rousseau’s. Rousseau must be aware that what he is suggesting is an intellectual farce and does it to get attention, whereas Monboddo is really stupid enough to take his nature doctrines seriously: "I am afraid (chukling and laughing) Monboddo does not know that he is talking nonsense" (Life, II, 74). When Johnson had met Monboddo during the Scottish tour of 1773 they disagreed on topics where their disagreement was not surprising, but on the whole seem to have gotten along well enough (Boswell, Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, Life, V, 77–83). Johnson’s comment in his Journal was that "the magnetism of Lord Monboddo’s conversation drew us out of our way" (Western Islands, p. 11, Life, V, 74, n. 1). To Mrs. Thrale he wrote that the famous discussion of the relative merits of the shopkeeper and the savage was "maintained on both sides without full conviction: Monboddo declared boldly for the savage, and I perhaps for that reason sided with the citizen" (Letters, I, 321). It is difficult to tell whether excessive courtesy or his sense of humor restrained Johnson on this occasion. In the same letter, however, he does make fun of Monboddo’s Of the Origin and Progress of Language (1733), in which Darwinian theories are prefigured. To Johnson, this is "a strange book." Monboddo reacted with less amusement: Johnson was "the most invidious and malignant man [he had] ever known" (quoted in Life, II, 74 n. 1).

41 Ibid., II, 12. There was only one occasion on which Johnson approved of a passage in Rousseau, when he agreed with Mrs. Thrale that Rousseau’s comment on "the hard Task of Christianity" was "beautiful" (Thraliana, I, 203–4). Chester F. Chapin, in "Dr. Johnson’s Approval of a Passage in Rousseau, "Notes and Queries" (Nov., 1959), 413–14, locates the passage referred to as La Nouvelle Héloïse, Part VI, Letter 6: "la véritable humilité du Chretien . . . c’est de trouver toujours sa tâche au dessus de ses forces, etc." (ed. Daniel Mornet [Paris, 1925], IV, 224–5).

“une céléste et majestueuse simplicité dont son Auteur l’avoir empreinté,” 43 “La Nature,” he pointed out in the Second Discours,

traite tous les animaux abandonné à ses soins avec une prédilection, qui semble montrer combien elle est jalouse de ce droit . . . Le Cheval, le Chat, le Taureau, l’Ane même ont la plupart une taille plus haute, tous une constitution plus robust . . . dans les forets que dans nos maisons. Il en est ainsi de l’homme même: en devenant sociable et Esclave, il devient foible, craintif, rampant.44

In the concluding paragraph of the Premier Discours Rousseau cried out:

O vertu, science sublime des ames Simples: faut il donc tant de peines et d’appareil pour te connoitre. Tes principes ne sont il pas gravés dans tous les coeurs? Et ne suffit-il pas, pour apprendre tes lois, de rentrer en soi-même, et d’écouter la voix de la conscience dans le silence des passions? Voila la véritable philosophie; sachons nous en contenter.45

Johnson appears to be parodying these passages point by point in the Nature philosopher’s impassioned speech. The way to be happy, says this sage, is

to live according to nature, in obedience to that universal and unalterable law with which every heart is originally impressed; which is not written on it by precept, but engraved by destiny, not instilled by education, but infused at our nativity. He that lives according to nature will suffer nothing from the delusions of hope, or importunities of desire. . . . Other men may amuse themselves with subtle definitions or intricate ratiocinations. Let them learn to be wise by easier means: let them observe the hind of the forest, and the linnet of the grove.46

The Nature philosopher’s cure for the “uneasiness” that Johnson saw as the real difference between man and “the hind of the forest” thus makes him as absurd as the “wise and happy man” of Chapter XVIII.47 The Nature philosopher’s remedy lies in the animal nature that is below man rather than in the purely rational that is above, but

43 Jean Jacques Rousseau, Second Discours (Amsterdam, 1755), Iv., quoted in Sewall, “Rousseau’s Second Discourse.”
44 Ibid., p. 25.
45 Œuvres (Neuchatel, 1764), I, 57.
47 There was in fact a strong strain of both cultural and chronological primitivism in the teaching of the Roman Stoics. For passages from Seneca amply illustrating this tendency see A. O. Lovejoy et al., A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas, (Baltimore, 1935), I, pp. 260–87.
the difference between the two sages is superficial. Both insist that man can be "happy" by ridding himself of his burdensome humanity. When Rasselas humbly remarks that he "doubts not the truth of a position which a man so learned has so confidently advanced" and only inquires "what it is to live according to nature," the philosopher's canting reply is that "to live according to nature, is to act always with due regard to the fitness arising from the relations and qualities of causes and effects; to concur with the great and unchangeable scheme of universal felicity; to co-operate with the general disposition and tendency of the present system of things." This makes his point quite identical with the optimistic one satirized in the review of *A Free Enquiry*.

What Johnson is objecting to in Rousseau and in his English adherents becomes clear when we note that the Nature philosopher's discourse is made in answer to "one who appeared more affected" than the rest of those present, by Rasselas' narrative of a hermit who hated the life he had deliberately chosen. This person who is deeply moved explains the hermit's dilemma in terms of what Mrs. Thrale had called Johnson's "favourite hypothesis," 48 and which is in fact the chief theme of *Rasselas*. "The hope of happiness," he says, "is so strongly impressed, that the longest experience is not able to efface it. Of the present state, whatever it be, we feel, and are forced to confess, the misery; yet, when the same state is again at a distance, imagination paints it as desirable." 49 What is wrong with the Nature philosopher, in other words, is that he is not "affected" by the one great truth real experience is capable of showing beyond doubt: that human life *sui generis*, because of its "middle" nature, must involve misery and frustration. Rousseau's doctrines are for Johnson pure "nonsense" because they appear to cover up this basic fact in a mass of verbiage that can mean only one more example of the triumph of imagination and self-deception. What Johnson finds missing in such "speculations" is once again the direct confrontation and rational acceptance of human reality.

It is this obstinate insistence on experience, and in particular on the experience of life as "a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding," 50 that forms the basis of all Johnson’s

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48 Thraliana, 179.
50 Mrs. Thrale, Anecdotes, in *J. M.*, I, 204. Johnson is arguing that one must be charitable to beggars despite the fact that in all probability the money will be spent on gin and tobacco. Cf. Thraliana, I, 180.
violent, ironic, and often insulting attacks, in both his conversation and writings, upon all those whom he considered cowardly and hypocritical in that they would not admit and face life's "misery." Once, during a conversation about drunkenness, Mrs. Anna Williams wondered "what pleasure men can take in making beasts of themselves." Johnson's response to the stimulus was immediate: "I wonder, Madam, that you have not penetration enough to see the strong inducement of this excess; for he who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man." In his own writings he did not hesitate to describe "the dismal receptacles to which the prostitute returns from her nocturnal excursions . . . the wretches that lie crowded together, mad with intemperance, ghastly with famine, nauseous with filth, and noisome with disease." He was irritated by the mention of the very possibility of absolute happiness and serenity on earth, for he regarded such talk as inevitably a combination of complacency, hypocrisy, and irreligion. Mrs. Thrale relates how a friend once insisted that "his wife's sister was really happy, and called upon the lady to confirm his assertion." When the lady did so "somewhat roundly," Johnson's irritated comment was that if she really was as contented as she claimed to be, "her life gives the lie to every research of humanity; for she is happy without health, without beauty and without understanding." Later to the reproving Mrs. Thrale, he said, "I tell you, the woman is ugly, and sickly, and foolish, and poor; and would it not make a man hang himself to hear such a creature say, it was happy?"

Thus human life is defined by the need it creates for narcotics of one kind or another. I have tried to explain the connection Johnson sees between some of the philosophical narcotics he exposes in his satire on man. The optimist, the stoic, and the primitivist—all avoiding confrontation of the real misery of fallen man, all claiming to possess the secret of "happiness" on earth—are unmasked as intellectual drug-peddlers. The internal coherence of this pessimistic exposé, I have argued, becomes clearer when we are

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64 It should perhaps be remarked that although Johnson's dislike for primitivist ideas must ultimately be traced to his orthodoxy, Christianity itself was not exempt from a traditional primitivist bias. For an admirably detailed study of primitivism in patristic and medieval thought see G. Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1948).
aware of the paradoxical role played in Johnson's thought by the conception of man as middle link in a universal hierarchy. Man has two faculties. His Reason discloses the human situation as it is; his Imagination avoids or "gilds" it. The chain of being, itself the drug of optimists and theodicists, is to be rejected as a hoax of the imagination since it is nothing but a way of sweetening the pill with lofty verbiage, but it nevertheless forms the metaphorical framework within which Johnson's view of both man's rationality and of his escapist fantasies becomes clear. Man in reason knows himself for what he is; in imagination he tries to become an angel, a beast, or, unwittingly, both at once. The more he does so, the more manifest are his real misery and, by negation, the potential rationality—the possibility of virtue and dignity—implied in his mixed nature.

Johnson's metaphysical position can only be summed up in this paradox. R. K. Kaul, who concludes on entirely insufficient evidence that "according to Johnson there are three kinds of creation, in the ascending order, the mechanical, the sensitive and the rational" misses the point. His statement, which would ascribe to Johnson actual belief in a cosmic hierarchy, is misleading because, in the first place, Johnson never said this, and, secondly, for him to have said it would have put him on a level with the metaphysical "speculators" he despised. Kaul's assertion is based on a single sentence of the Sophist (not "Skeptic" as Kaul erroneously labels him) satirized in the ninety-fifth Rambler: "I sometimes exalted vegetables to sense, and sometimes degraded animals to mechanism." A reading of this assertion in its context shows that Johnson was not expressing his own metaphysical credo at all; he was merely illustrating his protagonist's "vitiated, ignorant and heady" pride in his ability to "distinguish [himself] by sophisms."

I hope I have shown more accurately what role the idea of metaphysical hierarchy actually played in Johnson's thought. For all his lambasting of Jenyns and Pope, for all his assertion that "the chain of being cannot possibly have being," his satirical expose itself depends on the concept it attacks. Plenitude and hierarchy do not make sense, but the concomitants of the chain concept—that

man is best understood in terms of his attempt to become what is above him or what is below him, and that the exercise of human reason is at its noblest not when it is abstract and detached but when it is truly "passionate"—are at the core of everything Johnson had to say about life.