

America's First Renaissance Man, Founding Father of the American Dream: Samuel Johnson of King's College - Princeton's Jonathan Edwards

The two greatest philosophical thinkers of Colonial America were the American Rev. Dr. Samuel Johnson (1696–1772) of Guilford, Connecticut, and the Rev. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) of East Windsor Connecticut. Both went to Yale, were working ministers in New England, college presidents and influential contemporaries through their writings and preaching.

Though Johnson by any measure was more influential in his day, he is little known today save at Columbia, the university he founded. However, Jonathan Edwards has a college named after him at Yale, a Jonathan Edwards Center also at Yale, nearly 300 books written about him in the Library of Congress – and even a winery named after him.

Samuel Johnson was the first academic to introduce the Enlightenment into the American college curriculum in 1716, teaching Locke, Newton and Copernicus at Yale college.¹ Among his students was Jonathan Edwards, seven years his junior. Johnson was called “the founder of American philosophy”² and wrote the first textbook on moral philosophy in America.³ He chose to write it in English rather than Latin to make it more accessible to the masses; and indeed, it went to six imprints beyond the original influential journal article he wrote in 1730.⁴ The 1752 edition, published by Benjamin Franklin, was used by Johnson when he opened Kings College

¹ Ellis, Joseph, *The New England Mind in Transition: Samuel Johnson of Connecticut, 1696–1772* (Yale University Press, 1973), 45-49. Ellis uses the *Yale 1718 Commencement Broadside* to trace the change from the old Puritan curriculum to what Johnson called the “New Learning” and what we call the Enlightenment.

² Walsh, James, *Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic: Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges* (Fordham University Press, New York, 1925):185.

³ *Rutledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward Craig, Taylor & Francis, Eds. (1998):124. Also, *The English Short Title Database*, <http://estc.bl.uk/>, in March of 2017 was searched for variations on “students/pupils/young scholars” and “moral philosophy” in the records, then sorted the results by date to investigate early books on moral philosophy in English.

⁴ Johnson considered his moral philosophy to have started with an article published in the popular intellectual journal *The Republic of Letters* as 1) Johnson, Samuel, “A General View of Philosophy”, *The Republic of Letters*, Article XXXVII, May 1731, Printed in Volume VII, (London: William Innus, 1731):375-392. He ordered copies of the short article and handed them out to educators around America over the next three decades. He followed this article with a series of six longer textbook imprints and one unpublished draft. The first was written in 1740 for use at Yale published under a pseudonym three years later as 2) Johnson, Samuel, *An introduction to the study of philosophy exhibiting a general view of all the arts and sciences, for the use of pupils* (New London, 1743). 3) A second lower cost and possibly higher imprint run of this “second edition” of Johnson’s philosophy was printed in London in 1744. 4) Johnson revised his textbook and printed it under a new title Johnson, Samuel, *Ethices Elementa. Or The first principles of moral philosophy* (Boston, 1746). 5) a second imprint *Ethices Elementa* was printed Boston in 1748, though a record of this imprint is missing from the *English Short Title Catalogue*. This imprint is mentioned in Thomas, Isaiah, *The History of Printing in America* (J. Munsell, 1874), 2:497. 2:360, and in Evans, Charles, *American Bibliography: 1730-1750* (Blakely Press, 1903), 2:360. Herbert Schneider described a draft version in Schneider, Herbert, and Schneider, Carol, *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College; His Career and Writings*, 4 vols. (Columbia University Press, 1929), “Bibliography and Chronological Index”, 4:308. Benjamin Franklin printed this as 5) Johnson, Samuel, *Ethica: or the first principles of moral philosophy* (Philadelphia, Franklin and Hall, 1752). Johnson’s protégée the Rev. Dr. William Smith printed in England an edited lower cost edition with an English title as 6) Johnson, Samuel, and Smith, William ed., *The Elements of Philosophy* (London : printed for A. Millar, in the Strand, 1754). Johnson prepared a seventh heavily revised version with the title 7) *Elements of Philosophy: A Short System of the Mind & Morals*, which is in the Columbia University

in 1754. At an estimated 3,000 to 3,600 printed copies of his book alone⁵ this is over one for every American colonial college graduate between 1743 and 1776.⁶ In it he taught a “new system of morality”⁷ based on “pursing our highest Happiness by the universal practice of virtue”.⁸ It was this morality that eventually made its way into the American psyche via the Declaration of Independence giving voice to the American Dream. He embraced the notion of free will, directly refuting the predeterminism of his Puritanical heritage. He taught the existential maxim “I perceive and act therefore I am”,⁹ an active extension of his mentor, George Berkeley's Subjective Idealism, “to be is to be perceived” which in turn was an extension of the Rationalist Rene Descartes' “I think therefore I am”. Fitting that Johnson, forever the educationalist, would be remembered for giving us his own active form of existentialism. For after all, what is the purpose of education if not to make a difference in the world.

In terms of their theological legacies, Jonathan Edwards was a Reformed Puritan, meaning he accepted the math and science that Johnson taught him, but retained his Calvinist theology, while accepting the “born again” theology of the Great Awakening, what scholars call “experiential theology”. He was the intellectual part of a movement founded in the 1740s by Rev. George Whitefield, who invented camp meetings, revival services and enthusiastic emotional preaching. However, the movement kept the predestination and sin aspects of orthodox Calvinism, as is clear from the title of Edward's best-known sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. This theological tradition can be traced directly to today's American protestant evangelical Christian religions.

In the American colonies, there was an ‘alternative’ theology of tolerance that Samuel Johnson encouraged to grow right from this same hotbed of Calvinist theology and Puritan culture. One that espoused a loving god and that all are equal, valuable and capable of greatness, replacing predestination and sin with freewill. This was the Episcopal Church (Church of England), the church of the mother country. To this Johnson added his new system of morality based on the pursuit of happiness. Edwards' sermon can be thought of as looking

Library manuscript archives dated January 6, 1764. It was never published, probably because the market for “Introduction to Philosophy” textbooks in English in American colleges was saturated with the less expensive 1754 London edition.

⁵ Amory, Hugh, and Hall, David D. Hall, *A History of the Book in America*. Volume 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1:51, quoting the printer Isiah Thomas, suggest that 500 copies was a reasonable press run most works, though 600 to 2,000 copies (340) were not uncommon for histories, and important theological works while educational works ran as high as 2,000 (1:340) and 2,500 copies (1:344). Even larger runs were possible for protolyzing sermons and controversial pamphlets, and for works printed in London where costs were lower. An estimated 500 to 600 copies is a reasonable number for each of Johnson's six textbook imprints addressing the narrower market of colonial college students, recent graduates, lawyers, teachers, and interested intellectuals. His original journal article in the popular *The Republic of Letters* might have had three thousand printed copies. E. A. Reitan, E.A., Imago, “Expanding Horizons: Maps in the Gentleman's Magazine: 1731-1754”, *Imago Mundi*, Vol. 37, (1985): 54-62, 54 notes that the *Gentleman's Magazine* started competing with the *Republic of Letters* in 1731 at a circulation of 2,000 to 3,000 and grew by the 1740s to 5,000 – 6,000.

⁶ Purvis, Thomas L., *Colonial America To 1763* (Infobase Publishing, 1999), gives cumulative total of 1,943 Anglo-American college graduates by 1743, and 4,906 cumulative graduates by 1776, or 2,963 graduates who might have been exposed to Johnson's textbooks.

⁷ The subtitle to Johnson's *Ethices Elementa* is “A New System of Morality”.

⁸ Schneider, *Writings*, 2:372.

⁹ Schneider, *Writings*, 2:381

back upon the Puritan Mind and was filled with images of wickedness and hell. Whereas Johnson's most famous sermon *Concerning the Intellectual World* is filled with positive images of light and education. It sums up his own transition from Puritan Predestination to the Rationalism and Empiricism of the Enlightenment and was a marker for the new sensibilities of New England society.

As for their educational contribution to the new world, Jonathan Edwards was president of Princeton for two months, hired to lead an extant school with sympathetic religious doctrines before dying unexpectedly of a smallpox inoculation. Meanwhile, Samuel Johnson had already founded King's College (Columbia University) precisely because America's most cosmopolitan city needed a wellspring and beacon of beliefs consistent with his own. He was considered the most qualified man in the colonies to lead the new school, which was to be based on his "new model" of a colonial college, one incorporating science and utilitarian knowledge available to all regardless of religious beliefs.¹⁰ By that time, he had also changed Yale forever with two curriculum reforms to incorporate the Enlightenment for the first time in American education. Furthermore, Johnson was also part of an educational reform triumvirate of himself, Benjamin Franklin, and Provost William Smith in the founding of the College of Philadelphia, later to be the University of Pennsylvania. He was offered to be its first president by Ben Franklin who admired his moral philosophy greatly. But he turned it down with an eye toward starting a college in New York City instead. Jonathan Edwards had no such lasting impact on either Princeton or Yale. In fact, his contribution to Yale, which today reveres his name, was to splinter the young school and nearly undo it...twice.

Samuel Johnson was born at the close of the Renaissance and the dawn of the age of Enlightenment in America – an age he ushered in. He was the first scholar in America to lead the evolution from Medieval Scholasticism to Rationalism and Empiricism, dual realms of philosophical thought still debated to this day. Nevertheless, his brand of moral philosophy proved very influential with an important generation of fertile young minds that included our Founding Fathers just at their formative years.

Samuel Johnson also rejected the narrow Puritan theology of his heritage religion and converted along with eight other members of the Yale faculty and local ministers to the Church of England – an event so traumatic to Puritan New England it is known today as "The Great Apostasy". Hated and shunned as a turncoat in his home colony for thirty years, he returned insults with good humor, and attacks with great benevolence – often turning enemies into friends – all the while fighting for religious tolerance in New England. When Samuel Johnson died, his son deleted two lines from his epitaph referring to his opponents' poor treatment of him,¹¹ as they did not reflect his benevolence, nor were they necessary, as Johnson's promotion of religious tolerance had largely triumphed by the time of his death.

¹⁰ The tag phrase "new-model" college is taken from a letter by President James Madison of William and Mary to describe the reformed Enlightenment colleges proposed and founded by Dr. Samuel Johnson, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, and Dr. William Smith. [see Smith, Horace Wemyss, *The Life and Correspondence of the Rev. Wm. Smith, D.D.*, (Philadelphia, 1880): 567.] These colleges taught courses in English using subject matters expert professors instead of tutors, were profession oriented, non-denominational, and offered educational tracks

¹¹ Schneider, *Writings*, I:488

Samuel Johnson seemed driven to be an agent of change in so many realms; not surprisingly change did not come easily. Consider that he had to teach himself the Enlightenment's "new learning" of both the sciences and humanities, and in turn taught it to generations of students at Yale and King's Colleges. Think also of the courage necessary to lead The Great Apostasy and the challenges in starting King's College and leading it through its early years against strong and even vicious political opposition.

But most of all he was an educator. He wanted only to bring this emerging society to greatness by the education of all the people in it to the pursuit of happiness via virtue. In addition to his books for college students, he created the first English grammar for children *The First Easy Rudiments of Grammar, applied to the English Tongue*.¹² He later he published it combined with the first Hebrew grammar for children published in America as well. He personally taught over 3,000 students, children and adults between 1713 and 1772.¹³ He lived to help others and ultimately gave us a generation of Founding Fathers through his text and teachings¹⁴, and the American Dream through his approach to scholarship, philosophy and theology.

Did he get everything right? Like almost all great men, including Newton, Edwards, and Berkley, he had his follies and strange ideas; but then he was also the first in so many areas. Johnson's contribution was both singular and wide ranging precisely when there was so much to be done in this new land. Consider all the strands of philosophical and intellectual thought which have either faded away or proven useless. Johnson's contribution remains with us to this day.

Samuel Johnson made seminal contributions to early American thought, indeed her lasting identity, in all four fundamental spheres of her existence: theological, philosophical, educational and political (i.e. spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical). Few throughout her history could claim as much. For this reason and others presented here, we can think of Samuel Johnson as *America's First Renaissance Man and Founding Father of the American Dream*.

K. Daniel Libby, E'82 & E'84

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¹² Lyman, Rollo La Verne, *English Grammar in American Schools Before 1850*, (University of Chicago, 1922), 35, notes it "appears to have been the first English grammar prepared by an American" as well the first English grammar "published in America.

¹³ This is a rough calculation based on estimates of the students Johnson taught: it includes 205 common school children, 139 grammar school students, 148 college students, an estimated 2,850 adults in religious schools, and 98 post-graduate "disciples" in his "Housatonic Seminary", or a total of 3,424 students in 59 years.

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson's teaching had a direct influence on his longtime friend and academic and publishing partner Dr. Benjamin Franklin, his educational protégée Dr. William Smith Provost of the College of Philadelphia, his nephew General William Floyd, his son's protégée Roger Sherman, his King's College student Robert R. Livingston, his King's College student John Jay, and his own son Dr. William Samuel Johnson, who was the chair of the committee of style that wrote the final version of the *US Constitution*. As founder of King's College, and the author of his influential philosophy textbooks, and the progenitor of the "new model" American Enlightenment colleges, Johnson had an indirect influence on Alexander Hamilton and other college affiliated Founding Fathers, and indeed, on just about every graduate of Yale, King's College, and the College of Philadelphia after 1740, and on graduates of most all Colonial Colleges after 1760.