

Discussion Questions for Boswell's *Life of Johnson; years 1773 and 1776.*

1. Samuel Johnson is known for being a brilliant conversationalist. How does this come through in the readings? Johnson is said to argue both sides of a question in order to gain an advantage while speaking. Do the readings reflect this charge? When does Boswell hint that Johnson gives his true opinions?
2. Johnson famously said that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." What does he mean by this saying? Was this one of Johnson's true beliefs, or is it a case where Johnson is arguing to win a victory? Does Johnson view patriotism as a species of cant?
3. Johnson frequently chides Boswell for Boswell's belief in the superiority of a "natural man" over a man of letters or a citizen of the city. At one point, Boswell expounds on the state where a man can live a solitary existence without the pressures of city life. Johnson responds by saying: "If a bull could speak, he might as well exclaim—Here am I with this cow and this grass; what being can enjoy greater felicity?" What does Johnson mean by this statement? Is Johnson's statement a response to the growing Romantic movement? Do you think Boswell was serious or trying to provoke a reaction from Johnson?
4. Johnson was a Tory—a man who believed in stability of government, place, class structure, and a hierarchical distinction among men. In many respects, Johnson was a proponent of the old system of landed wealth and was wary of a new moneyed class that abandoned the old Tory principles. At one point he declaims: "I admit that the great increase of commerce and manufactures hurts the military spirit of a people; because it produces a competition for something else than martial honours,—a competition for riches." What does he mean by this statement? Why does he link military prowess and commerce? Is there some sort of struggle for honor—between military prowess and money—that Johnson regrets? How has this struggle played out in modern times?
5. In 1776, Johnson was contemplating making a trip to Italy; he remarked that ". . . All our religion, almost all our law, almost all our arts, almost all that sets us above savages, has come to us from the Mediterranean." What does he mean by this comment? Do you agree or disagree with his comment? Why or why not?
6. Boswell has a habit of continuing to harangue Johnson about trivial or meaningless opinions until Johnson upbraids him. Boswell mentions that a man (most likely Boswell) continued to ask one of Johnson's associates about Johnson's early life, until Johnson, becoming angered replied: "Sir, you have but two topics, yourself and me. I am sick of both." What do you think Boswell does this? Is Johnson sincere in his upbraiding? Have you ever experienced something like this, and if so, how did you handle it?
7. Johnson was a deeply religious man, and was in constant fear that he did not do enough to warrant his intellectual gifts. Despite his prodigious output and workload, he always felt that he should do more. Why do you think he felt this way? Were his fears justified? Do you think he regretted his frequent talks with Boswell and others, and that this contributed in some way to his feeling that he could do more with his talents?