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A Study of Samuel Johnson's Critical Thought

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Abstract

Samuel Johnson's (1709–1784) critical thought is rooted in the moral concerns of Neoclassicism while also integrating the rational spirit of the Enlightenment and empiricist philosophy. Although Johnson's criticism was still categorized within the Neoclassical tradition in the context of the eighteenth century, his emphasis on the moral function of literature, his regard for universal human experience, and his trust in the sensibility of ordinary readers had already nurtured within that tradition a distinctly modern structure of critical thought. This paper summarizes the characteristics of Johnson's critical thought into three interconnected main lines: moral criticism, empirical criticism, and reader-oriented criticism. Based on this, a three-dimensional analytical framework is constructed, examining the core content and evolution of Johnson's critical thought through the ethical dimension, the methodological dimension, and the reception dimension. Under the guidance of these three lines, the study traces, from the perspectives of intellectual history and genealogy, the development and contemporary reinterpretations of Johnson's critical thought over more than two centuries, elucidating how it has continued to be activated and rearticulated in different historical contexts. The article argues that Johnson's persistent commitment to the "unity of literature and humanity" constitutes one of the most enduring and dynamic conceptual cores of his critical legacy.

Keywords: Criticism; Humanity; Literature; Unity; Three-Dimensional Analytical Framework