

ON THE CHARACTER AND DUTY OF AN ACADEMICK

Samuel Johnson

The great effect of society is, that by uniting multitudes in one general co-operation, it distributes to different orders of the community the several labours and occupations of life. The general end is general happiness, which must result from the diversified industry of many hands, and the various di-rection of many minds. From this distribution every man being confined to his own employment, derives opportunities of attaining readiness and skill by improving daily on himself, and to this improvement must be ascribed the accommodations which are enjoyed in popular cities, and countries highly civilised, compared with those which are to be found in places thinly inhabited, where necessity compels every man to exercise more arts than he can learn.

From this complex system arise different obligations. Every man has his task assigned, of which, if he accepts it, he must consider himself as accountable for the performance. The individuals of this illustrious community are set apart, and distinguished from the rest of the people, for the confirmation and promotion of rational knowledge. An academick is a man supported at the public cost, and dignified with public honours, that he may attain and impart wisdom. He is maintained by the public, that he may study at leisure; he is dignified with honours, that he may teach with weight. The great duty therefore of an academick is diligence of inquiry, and liberality of communication. Of him that is appointed to teach, the first business is to learn, an unintermitted attendance to reading must qualify him to be heard with profit. When men whose active employments allow them little time for cultivating the mind, and whose narrow education leaves them unable to judge of abstruse questions, may content themselves with popular tenets, and current opinions, they may repose upon their instructors, and believe many important truths upon the bare authority of those from whom they received them; but the academick is the depository of the public faith, it is required of him to be always able to prove what he asserts, to give an account of his hope, and to display his opinion with such evidence as every species of argument admits. Our colleges may be considered as the citadel of truth, where he is to stand on his guard as a sentinel, to watch and discover the approach of falsehood, and from which he is to march out into the field of controversy, and bid defiance to the teachers of corruption. For such service he can be fitted only by laborious study, and study therefore is the business of his life; the business which he cannot neglect without breaking a virtual contract with the community. Ignorance in other men may be censured as idleness, in an academick it must be abhorred as treachery.

This text is taken from David Fairer, "JD Fleeman: A Memoir." *Studies in Bibliography* 48 (1995): 1-24. It was published posthumously in 1793 as an "appendix" to an article "Hospitality: A Discourse" by John Moir, an otherwise undistinguished writer who had somehow come in possession of Johnson's manuscript. For more on Moir and his interactions with Johnson, see "John Moir and his Brief Encounters with Samuel Johnson" by Anthony W. Lee, *Johnsonian News Letter*, September 2018, 69:2