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## Samuel Johnson and the Virtue of Capitalism

*The great 18th century writer on commerce and human happiness.*

*By Eliza Gray*

28 September 2009

*It was the ultimate gathering of statesmen, thinkers and artists, the likes of which aren't likely to be found in Davos or at any Renaissance Weekend. "The Club," as it was simply known, was founded in 1764 by the moralist and polymath Samuel Johnson, and included the likes of political philosopher Edmund Burke, painter Joshua Reynolds, naturalist Joseph Banks, historian Edward Gibbon and economist Adam Smith.*

*Over Monday night dinners at London's Turk's Head tavern, members would chew over everything from philosophy to rhetoric to art to questions of human character and nature. It's been said that the late 18th century was the last time in history a well-educated person could have a mastery of every great scholarly discipline. But it's also true that the greatest minds of the era believed that there was an essential unity of knowledge, and that the natural and humane sciences, or the moral and the political, could only be properly comprehended together.*

*We could use a club like that today, or at least we could attend more closely to what some of its members thought about the world they knew—and how they thought about it. That goes especially for Johnson, who is remembered mainly as the author of the first authoritative dictionary of the English language, but whose thoughts on human nature, morality and commerce are a timely antidote to the anticapitalist ethos that's become increasingly fashionable in the wake of the financial crisis.*

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