By the middle of the century, the progress of learning and the continued attempts by encyclopedists and encyclopedic works to provide a record of that progress had revealed the irreconcilability inherent in the pursuit of complete knowledge in the fullest sense of the phrase. Full comprehensiveness and total connectivity, while perhaps perfectly united in divine omniscience and still the final objective of Enlightenment, continued to pose tremendous challenges given the limitations of the human intellect. In January 1760, Samuel Johnson insisted in an issue of *The Idler* that the amount of knowledge in and about the world was simply and absolutely beyond the capacity of the single mind to comprehend completely:

To fix deeply in the mind the principles of science, to settle their limitations, and deduce the long succession of their consequences; to comprehend the whole compass of complicated systems, with all the arguments, objections, and solutions, and to reposit in the intellectual treasury the numberless facts, experiments, apophthegms, and positions which must stand single in the memory, and of which none has any perceptible connection with the rest, is a task which, tho’ undertaken with ardour and pursued with diligence, must at last be left unfinished by the frailty of our nature.¹

The multiple series and clauses of this single sentence reflect the overabundance they describe; they come quickly and without cessation until at last our frail nature is left buried beneath the avalanche. Though Johnson’s words distantly echo the laments of Francis Bacon, who likewise recognized mortality as an obstacle in the pathway to complete knowledge, they lack an equivalent sense that such an obstacle might

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¹ "To fix deeply in the mind the principles of science, to settle their limitations, and deduce the long succession of their consequences; to comprehend the whole compass of complicated systems, with all the arguments, objections, and solutions, and to reposit in the intellectual treasury the numberless facts, experiments, apophthegms, and positions which must stand single in the memory, and of which none has any perceptible connection with the rest, is a task which, tho’ undertaken with ardour and pursued with diligence, must at last be left unfinished by the frailty of our nature."
one day be overcome. Human nature, he suggests, defines the limits of human learning, and in the experience of the individual knowledge would always be incomplete.

Johnson’s primary concern in the above passage is the human rather than the text—the limits of the mind rather than those of the book. The book, though, also showed similar signs of strain. As discussed in the previous chapter, attempts to facilitate readers’ more complete understanding of large bodies of knowledge resulted in the experimental and ultimately unsuccessful organizational tactics of long-lived projects like *Martin’s Magazine* and *An Universal History*. They also produced generic anomalies such as *A new and complete dictionary of arts and sciences* (1754), the editors of which determined that article length should be proportional to physical size within categorical subdivisions. “The smallest insects and plants find a place,” the preface promises, “only a less one than those allotted for the description of the elephant and oak.” “Line” therefore takes up more column inches than “point,” and “epic” more pages than “lyric,” even though “atom” runs longer than “acorn.” Considerations of neither space occupied nor time taken, however, explain why the editors deemed five pages and two plates the appropriate amount to devote to “electricity.” The dictionary predictably did not see a second edition.

Just over fifty years after Henry Curzon’s *The universal library: or, compleat summary of science* (1712) confidently trumpeted that it had, “like Homer’s *Iliads* in a Nut-shell ... Enclosed the Learning, Arts, and Artifices of the Microcosm” and “demonstrated together at one View, all Humane, Sciential, Natural and Artificial Rarities,” the author-editors of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in essence declared an end to conventional claims to encyclopedic completeness. In their estimation, such a view of knowledge could not in fact be composed, and its complete structure could not be appreciably represented in any space whatsoever. Even the most successful encyclopedias of the age, they insisted, left true knowledge (along with the reader) lost in a tangle of organizational inefficiencies. The *Britannica*, conceived in part as a nationalistic answer to the *Encyclopédie* and as a successor to Chambers’s by then outdated *Cyclopædia*, therefore planned to do away with what had been the defining features of the Enlightenment encyclopedia.

Neither cross-references nor the old genealogical trees of knowledge, explains the *Britannica* proposal, enabled readers to reconstruct complete systems of knowledge. In previous universal dictionaries, the authors insist, “every art and science lies scattered under a variety of words; by which means, besides the labour of hunting for science