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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S *AUTOBIOGRAPHY* AND THE EDUCATION OF AMERICA

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Franklin's *Autobiography* was written in part to provide a model for the emerging democratic individual and democratic culture of America. Franklin's teaching in the work has been subject to severe criticisms from the beginning, though it has had many defenders, too. Neither friend nor foe, however, has taken a sustained look at the *Autobiography* itself to explore its teaching in detail. I look at Franklin's presentation of the relationship of wealth and virtue, his utilitarianism, and his vision of democratic society and find a subtle and robust ideal deftly calculated to educate and elevate American culture.

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* has lived a curious life. Begun by Franklin as a memoir to his son and his further posterity, as well as a vehicle for the pleasure found in recollection (1964, 43), it quickly took on—if it did not have from the start—a more public purpose (see Dawson 1977/78; Lerner 1987, chap. 1; Seavey 1988). Franklin inserted two letters at the beginning of part 2 to confirm that the *Autobiography's* serious mission was nothing less than the education of a new nation, using Franklin's life and mind as its model. In fact, the work became not only a staple of American popular culture but a conduit through which that culture passed to other parts of the globe. It was printed and reprinted, in the United States and Europe, through the nineteenth century and beyond. It was influential in Japan at a time when the modern Japanese character was forming (Ki 1987). Parts of it made their way into McGuffey's readers, and Parson Weems did it the dubious honor of producing a bowdlerized version (Franklin 1964, 9–12).¹ Yet the work, like the man himself, has also had fierce critics; and these seem to have got the upper hand in this century, when Franklin's work—indeed, his reputation as a whole—are in profound eclipse. Of course, all the figures and ideas of the founding period are in relative eclipse now, with philosophy, politics, and even constitutional law sometimes claiming to have superseded the eighteenth-century models and popular culture's memory stretching barely two decades back. Still, Franklin's fall, from such a height, has been particularly stunning.

Some of the reaction against Franklin and his *Autobiography* stems from the view that they represent a quasi-Puritan outlook, or the outlook of Puritanism's alleged stepchild, the "Protestant ethic." Max Weber, who first defined this ethic, argued that Franklin's *Autobiography* embodies its "ideal type," in all its grim dutifulness (1958, esp. 48–50).² In a similar vein, Labaree notes that Mark Twain half-humorously inveighed against Franklin for producing an impossible deal of industriousness to be thrown up to all boys by their parents (Franklin 1964, 14–15). But if some critics have thought Franklin too strict, another

strain of criticism finds him and his *Autobiography* too lax, in a moral sense. In his own day, Abigail Adams thought Franklin almost a libertine. John Adams criticized him for being all appearance, devoid of real substance (though Adams seems to have thought this about most everyone except himself).³ This criticism, along with the notion that Franklin was morally shallow and self-serving, was carried forward by Adams's posterity and latter-day political sympathizers.⁴ In the twentieth century, Franklin has been attacked to much greater effect by D. H. Lawrence for being morally base: materialistic, bourgeois, calculating.⁵ And most recently, Alisdair MacIntyre, in his attempt to resuscitate a morality based on the virtues, has dismissed Franklin's moral ideal as shallow and utilitarian (MacIntyre 1984, 198–99, 243).

My purpose here is to reopen the question of Franklin's moral teaching and outlook as he presents it in his *Autobiography*; for while Franklin has had no lack of defenders, surprisingly little close attention has been paid to the text of his *Autobiography* with a view to drawing out the precise character of the moral ideal Franklin is promulgating through it. Such attention reveals a surprisingly subtle and multilayered moral teaching, one that easily escapes most of the criticisms that have been leveled against it. Its presentation is also carefully calibrated to influence the widest and most varied American audience. Education (including moral education) was a matter Franklin took seriously all his life, as many of his writings and projects attest.⁶ The *Autobiography*, as it stands, is the final and most comprehensive monument of that concern, undertaking, as it does, to help shape the emerging American character.⁷ Despite its casual and almost random appearance, the work contains a mature and consistent outlook on morality and the well-lived life and even a distinctive strategy for persuading its readers of the merits of that outlook.⁸

I do not propose to argue the elevation of Franklin's moral ideal when matched against such competitors as MacIntyre's Aquinas or its purity compared to Parson Weems's puritanism. I do propose, however, that Franklin's *Autobiography* fulfills much better than either of these the purpose of providing a new nation

and a newly emerging culture with a model that is appropriate to them, one that makes a bid to elevate them in a manner and to a degree that they are most likely to benefit from. The Franklin of the *Autobiography* is neither a classical hero nor a saint; but he does embody an ideal of a distinctly modern and democratic sort. In fact, those parts of the *Autobiography's* teaching that are most decried as vulgar or materialistic stem from Franklin's deep egalitarianism.⁹ He gives scope to the American impulse for material advancement (which it would not be possible or *fair* to suppress); but he gives that impulse a push in the direction of virtue and moderation, understood to be sure in a distinctive way. Equally important, he gives Americans an ideal of democratic public service that is quite high-minded, without being beyond the grasp of ordinary citizens. Franklin goes so far as to downplay in the *Autobiography* elements of his own history that are beyond the reach of ordinary human beings. At the same time, the *Autobiography* can inspire those who are drawn to the higher stature of Franklin himself, giving them important lessons on the place of a man of superior ability and accomplishment in a democratic milieu.

WEALTH AND VIRTUE

One of the leading themes of the *Autobiography* and one that Franklin takes evident pleasure in emphasizing is his own astonishing rise from poverty and obscurity to means and celebrity. One of the stated purposes of the work is to accentuate the contrast between his humble beginnings and his later success and to show the means by which it was accomplished (1964, 43). Franklin invites us to contemplate the contrast between his first, bedraggled appearance in Philadelphia and the prosperity and reputation he has since achieved there (p. 75). His first elevation to political office occasions similar reflections (p. 197). It is partly the prominence of this theme that makes the *Autobiography's* emphasis on worldly success so unmistakable. Permissiveness toward the impulse to material advancement is indeed one of the central—as well as one of the obvious—lessons of the *Autobiography*. It is also one of the most misunderstood.

The passage on the "Art of Virtue" in part 2 (1964, 148–60), which is probably the most famous in the *Autobiography*, is typical. Franklin proposes a list of 13 virtues, along with a method (the Art of Virtue) designed to allow anyone to become proficient in them. As an incentive to follow this method, Franklin portrays the virtues as instrumental, as *useful*. He assures his readers that his own success and happiness in life are owing to their cultivation (p. 157; see also p. 119); he even offers a fundamentally utilitarian general theory of virtue: "Vicious Actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the Nature of Man alone consider'd"; and it is "therefore every one's Interest

to be virtuous" (p. 158; see also p. 54). One of the first episodes recorded in the *Autobiography* taught Franklin the lesson "that nothing was useful which was not honest" (p. 54). Franklin's Poor Richard proverbs (which do not form part of the *Autobiography* but are faithful to part of its message) are even more closely associated with this kind of utilitarianism; the compendium of these proverbs that Franklin composed in 1757 is still widely known as *The Way to Wealth*.¹⁰

This is the side of Franklin that sent D. H. Lawrence into paroxysms of rage and contempt. Lawrence accused Franklin of deforming generations of readers with a stifling moral vision that has no place for true benevolence or nonmercenary virtue, and of turning man into a mechanism by his "method" of self-perfection (Lawrence 1964, chap. 4). We should not, however, let Lawrence's attack color our own reaction to Franklin's utilitarianism; nor should we mistake *The Way to Wealth* as exhaustive of Franklin's moral vision.¹¹ Franklin had rhetorical reasons for slanting the wisdom of Poor Richard a certain way, as he is careful to tell us in the *Autobiography*. The "Proverbial Sentences" of Poor Richard, he there says, were in general directed toward the humblest audience, the "common People, who bought scarce any other Books" (1964, 164). These proverbs were "chiefly such as inculcated Industry and Frugality, as the Means of procuring Wealth and thereby securing Virtue, it being more difficult for a Man in want to act always honestly, as (to use here one of those Proverbs) *it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright*" (ibid.).

Franklin is never shy about using money as an incentive to virtue, by insisting that virtue is the surest path to wealth. Precepts of this type are almost as common in the *Autobiography* as in Poor Richard, and it is these that have caused some to paint Franklin as an unregenerate materialist. In fact, though, they reflect only a recognition on Franklin's part of both the inevitable desire for wealth in people who have little and, just as importantly, the poor prospects for virtue in people who have nothing. It is a simple fact that a certain amount of prosperity is a necessary precondition of virtue in a democratic society like America. And Franklin recognizes that material advancement will inevitably preoccupy most of his audience.¹² Tocqueville wrote some fifty years later that effective moral teaching in the new, democratic age would have to reconcile itself, to some degree, to the material and self-centered preoccupations of the majority;¹³ and Franklin is not blind to this necessity. He is indeed guilty (as his critics claim) of refusing to regard this necessity as a moral failing. Moral education as envisaged by Franklin never attempts to persuade anyone that the ambition for material advancement should be sacrificed on the altar of virtue. In the American context, (as Tocqueville also implied), such a teaching would be both elitist and ineffectual. Franklin seeks, rather, to begin by directing material ambition to virtue as its means and then as its end, as well. The ultimate purpose of Poor Richard's exhortations, as Franklin says, was

not to produce a full sack but one that will stand upright (see Lerner 1987, 52; Stourzh 1954, 15–16).

The notion that virtue is in one's interest in a narrow, economic sense represents only the first level of the *Autobiography's* moral teaching. As the work's reference to the wisdom of poor Richard implies, the *Autobiography* seeks to address a wider audience—and deliver a morally less elementary message—than Poor Richard's. This is seen clearly enough in the way the work develops its most materialistic themes. Frugality and industry, key virtues in both Poor Richard and the *Autobiography*, are fairly narrowly connected to money-making; and Franklin recommends them highly as such. But he also is careful to subordinate them to both higher goods and other virtues that economic well-being paves the way to. He defines frugality as making no expense "but to do good to others or yourself" (1964, 149), and he justifies his inclusion of it and industry in his list of virtues by noting that the wealth they accumulate makes possible greater sincerity and justice (p. 151). Virtue may be "the means of procuring wealth" (as the *Autobiography's* synopsis of Poor Richard has it), but wealth serves the purpose of "securing Virtue" in turn (p. 159). In his own case, Franklin attributes to frugality and industry the "Acquisition of his Fortune, with all that Knowledge which enabled him to be an useful Citizen, and obtain'd for him some Degree of Reputation among the Learned" (p. 157).

If Franklin makes the virtues (especially frugality and industry) instrumental to the accumulation of wealth, the latter is firmly subordinated to the virtues in turn and to more noble pursuits, including, in Franklin's own case, philosophy or science. The *Autobiography's* elementary and, we might say, propaedeutic, utilitarianism should not conceal the fact that the work as a whole is actually directed strongly away from the concern for wealth as an end in itself. The example of Franklin's own business career is most eloquent. After prospering as a printer with the aid of his frugality and industry, Franklin retired at the age of 42 with a "sufficient tho' moderate Fortune" to allow him to pursue "Philosophical Studies and Amusements" (1964, 196; see also 119, 125). Like almost every American, Franklin had to concern himself with wealth first; but after his needs were comfortably met (Franklin actually became rather wealthy), he retired from commerce for higher pursuits. Franklin's description of these higher pursuits bears more than a passing resemblance to the classical vision of the life of noble leisure, especially when we add to it the public service that was immediately pressed upon him, which he accepted.

The *Autobiography* first caters to the reader's presumptive (and presumptively legitimate) concern with wealth, then directs it toward a much fuller vision of human happiness and the well-lived life. Public service, a reasonable or tolerant skepticism, and benevolent sociability are the elements of this vision that we shall concern ourselves with. For the present, we should notice that while the *Autobiogra-*

phy shows us a number of ways in which Franklin learned or changed his perspective over the course of his life, it never shows us a time when his concern was purely commercial or monetary. This is true to fact. In one of his youthful "Busy-Body" essays for example, Franklin praises the virtue of the ancient statesman Cato, then asks, "Who would not rather chuse, if it were in his Choice, to merit the above Character, than be the richest, the most learned, or the most powerful Man in the Province without it?" ([1907] 1970, vol. 2, p. 108)¹⁴ Cato is hardly a bourgeois ideal (the essay emphasizes his poverty); yet Franklin leaves very much open the possibility of acquiring riches, learning, and power while at the same time meriting a good character of reputation. It was always Franklin's notion that the four should be combined, which is possible if virtue (as he understands it) becomes the means, as well as the end, of the other ambitions. The moral outlook that this project embodies might be more earth-bound; but it is also more practicable, and safer, than that proposed by D. H. Lawrence in its place.¹⁵

THE VIRTUE OF REASONABLENESS

Once we get beyond the simple view of the Franklin of the *Autobiography* as a stern master of bourgeois discipline or a mercenary and try to explore more seriously his view of the place of virtue in a well-lived life, we are met with an entirely different set of puzzles. Despite the fact that the *Autobiography* tries to inspire its readers with a sincere devotion to virtue, Franklin's own devotion as portrayed at points in the work has to be described as casual at best. A gentle irony suffuses his account of the art of virtue, which began as a youthful "Project of achieving moral perfection" (see Sayre 1963, 522). "I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong" (1964, 148), Franklin says at the outset of this account; but even with this unguarded presumption the project was not a complete success. Franklin confesses that by the end, he gave up trying to perfect the one virtue he found most difficult, namely, order. It was not worth the effort, given his natural disinclination to it (pp. 155–56). Similarly, perfect humility has escaped him (p. 160). Added to this is the fact that the virtues themselves (as Franklin identifies them) are hardly models of moral strictness. Some of them, like silence, order, and cleanliness—not to mention industry and frugality—would scarcely have merited mention by most earlier moralists (see Pangle 1988, 297–98). These might be thought to belong to a Puritan tradition; but then, there is Franklin's definition of *chastity*: "Rarely [to] use Venery but for Health or Offspring; Never to Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another's Peace or Reputation" (p. 150). We learn enough in the *Autobiography* to realize that each of the loopholes in this definition is deliberate; if Franklin had viewed the virtue more strictly, he might have been forced to give up on it, as he did on order. His youthful "Intrigues with low Women"

are by and large excused by him as products of necessity ("that hard-to-be-govern'd Passion of Youth," p. 128; see also p. 115). He does *not* include them among the "Errata" he occasionally atones for in the *Autobiography*.

This remarkable indulgence can be explained only partially by the fact that the work itself is addressed to a son who may have been a product of one of these intrigues. It can also be explained only partially by the fact that the art of virtue is designed to put a level of virtue within the grasp of every man and that like many of the sayings of Poor Richard, it thus represents the beginning, rather than the end, of a full human life (see Meyer 1987, 158). The fact is that Franklin's moral teaching as a whole is conspicuously more tolerant than that of many of his religious or philosophical forebears. In fact, it is one of the principal, if less explicit, purposes of the *Autobiography* to combat the kind of moralism that had been characteristic of earlier traditions, particularly those of Puritan America. The moral code Franklin wants to replace them with, however, is somewhat elusive.

One way to get at Franklin's own moral outlook is by asking what in his view justifies a new moral tolerance. In the *Autobiography*, this tolerance is grounded partially in a distinctive notion of *reasonableness*. Franklin's reasonableness is different from the rationalism typical of the eighteenth century. Eighteenth-century rationalism sought answers to scientific, moral, and religious questions by means of unassisted human reason; and Franklin does likewise. But governing the operation of his rationalism is a pragmatic and skeptical *bon sens*, which, among other things, acts as a brake on speculative reason itself. This "reasonableness" is prior to morality and even to a religion, in the sense that it governs and moderates them. It is the resolute enemy of intolerance and zealotry, even the zealotry of reason. It is this trait, as much as wealth or virtue, that accounts for Franklin's happiness and the pleasing character of his example. In the course of a rather turbulent life, Franklin remains the picture of equanimity, kept always on an even keel by his earthy reasonableness, an amiable trait that is infectious—and is meant to be.

According to the *Autobiography*, this trait was not native to Franklin. His early inclination was, rather, to dogmatism. Upon reading a tract at age 16 equating flesh eating with murder, he became a principled vegetarian (1964, 63). This lasted until he was sorely tempted by some cod during his first voyage to Philadelphia. "I balanc'd some time between Principle and Inclination," Franklin says, then reasoned that since the cod were seen to have smaller fish in their stomachs, he could eat them in turn (p. 87). He concludes, "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do" (p. 88). The same sentiment appears more elaborately in his account of the art of virtue, to justify Franklin's abandonment of the goal of achieving moral perfection: "For something that pretended to be Reason

was every now and then suggesting to me, that such extream Nicety as I exacted of my self might be a kind of Foppery in Morals, which if it were known would make me ridiculous; that a perfect Character might be attended with the Inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent Man should allow a few Faults in himself, to keep his Friends in Countenance" (p. 156). The obvious playfulness of these two passages does not undercut the principle of reason or reasonableness that they outline, a principle that Franklin clearly acted on in both cases.¹⁶ In typically satiric and self-deprecating fashion, these passages point to a view of the moderating role of reason in moral deliberation that is central to the outlook of the *Autobiography*.

Some of the most revealing applications of this view are seen in Franklin's treatment of religion. Here, Franklin's early dogmatism was at its strongest. Born into a pious Boston household, from an early age he devoured writings of Plutarch, Defoe, and Mather, along with books of "polemic Divinity" that he found in his father's library (1964, 58). The mature Franklin regrets only the last: their argumentative style, he says, made him overly disputatious (pp. 58, 60). The arguments themselves, however, had quite a different effect, causing him to doubt revelation by age 15 (p. 113). Soon after, books written against Deism turned him into "a thorough Deist" (p. 114); but this only fed his taste for speculative religious and moral dispute. While working in London at age 19, he composed a pamphlet called *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* ([1907] 1970, 57–71), which purported to prove that there is no free will, that all our actions are determined by pleasure and pain, and that evil does not exist.

Franklin's London employer thought this production abominable, and the mature Franklin concurs (1964, 96, 114; see also p. 74). In the *Autobiography*, Franklin mentions the work only to disown it and to make a point about what he learned from it. He says he abandoned its doctrine when he discovered that it "perverted" some of the friends he imparted it to, who "afterwards wrong'd me greatly without the least Compunction" (p. 114; see also pp. 89–90). He concluded that "this Doctrine tho' it might be true, was not very useful" and at the same time "grew convinc'd that *Truth, Sincerity and Integrity* in Dealings between Man and Man"—qualities undermined by the doctrine—are necessary to the felicity of life (*ibid.*). Guided by this new insight, he gave up his speculative creed for something new.

The lesson we are supposed to draw from this episode is complex. Franklin's abandoning Deism on the grounds of disutility "tho' it might be true" is not as misologist as it sounds; for he immediately adds that he suspected some error had crept into his reasoning, making it neither true *nor* useful. But Franklin claims that such errors and their effects are "common in metaphysical Reasonings" (1964, 114), which constitutes an indictment of at least a certain

type or application of reason. In a letter to Benjamin Vaughan of November 9, 1779, Franklin confided that the *Dissertation*, together with a later essay maintaining more or less the opposite thesis, caused him to abandon this type of speculation altogether: "The great uncertainty I found in metaphysical reasonings disgusted me, and I quitted that kind of reading and study for others more satisfactory" [1907] 1970, vol. 6, pp. 410–13, esp. 412). The abandonment of speculative or metaphysical reason, however, is not the abandonment of reason per se. As the *Autobiography* and his entire oeuvre make clear, Franklin remains a dedicated rationalist. But his rationalism is informed by a strong sense of the limits of pure speculation.

Franklin's mature attitude is captured in his well-known address at the conclusion of the Federal Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia: "I confess, that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but, Sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it; for, having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change my opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment of others." ([1907] 1970, vol. 9, pp. 607–9).¹⁷ The Convention had failed to adopt any of his major proposals (Becker 1931, 595);¹⁸ but by the end, Franklin held that the practical matter of administering the government well was more important than the grand theories of government bandied about the convention ([1907] 1970, vol. 9, pp. 608–9).¹⁹ This does not mean that he despairs of rational guidance in matters of government, only that such guidance will be halting and must constantly be tested against experience.

One of the key lessons of the *Autobiography* concerns the fallibility of human reason when pushed into the realm of pure speculation; but Franklin does not push this too far, either. Readers of the work gain a sense of the incompleteness of our knowledge but in a way that leads to moderation, rather than debilitating skepticism. What Franklin calls *Reasonableness* serves in the *Autobiography* to block the implementation of speculative conclusions in philosophy or theology; but it does so in the name of Franklin's own more earthy and commonsensical understanding of the proper way of life. It is in this spirit that the work launches a gentle but pervasive and insistent assault on religious dogmatism. The *Autobiography* is unquestionably at its most satirical in portraying dogmatic sectarians. Most unforgettable is Samuel Keimer, Franklin's first employer in Philadelphia. Keimer, a man of unconventional (not to say ludicrous) religious beliefs, was so impressed with young Ben's abilities in debate that he proposed to establish a new religious sect, with himself in the place of the prophet and Franklin as the confuter of opponents (1964, 88). Franklin agreed, on condition of making vegetarianism one of the tenets of the sect. For Keimer "was usually a great Glutton, and I promis'd my self some Diversion in half-starving him" (pp. 88–89). This

diversion lasted three months, until Keimer, lusting after the "Flesh Pots of Egypt," gave in and devoured an entire roast pig (p. 89).

The humorous juxtaposition of Keimer's religious dogmatism and vegetarianism is an appropriate one, inasmuch as both are associated in the *Autobiography* with a failure of reasonableness in Franklin's sense. There is more impatience than humor, meanwhile, in Franklin's presentation of the Quakers' doctrinaire pacifism. Franklin illustrates how it forced the Quakers into hypocritical subterfuges and disingenuous evasions when faced with the necessity of providing for the common defense (1964, 186–90). As he dryly comments in a parallel context, "Common Sense aided by present Danger, will sometimes be too strong for whimsical Opinions" (p. 232). The actions of the Quakers, as opposed to their doctrine, testify to the greater power, as well as sagacity, of common sense and practical necessity. At other points in the *Autobiography*, Franklin's response to strong religious devotion is simply to bury it in silence. He conspicuously refuses to be moved by the piety of a devout Catholic woman he encounters in London (p. 103; see Lerner 1987, 57), by the renowned preacher George Whitefield when he visits Philadelphia, or by the whole religious revival of the Great Awakening (pp. 175–80). Readers of the *Autobiography* subtly imbibe a cool and reasonable attitude toward religious matters from Franklin himself.

This does not mean that Franklin is pushing his readers to irreligion, however; for another of the key lessons of the *Autobiography* is that religion can and should be reasonable. Franklin pointedly approves of the Dunkers, a sect that refused to publish its doctrines, on the grounds that they might later have to be changed (1964, 190–91). "This Modesty in a Sect is perhaps a singular Instance in the History of Mankind," he marvels, "every other Sect supposing itself in Possession of all Truth" (p. 191). The modest admission of fallibility, together with the Dunkers' openness to progress, brings them closest to what Franklin seeks in religion. He assures us that he himself never doubted the existence of God (p. 146)²⁰ and recommends a creed that could be classified as a species of Deism, with a providential God and a strong emphasis on good works. He lists its tenets as follows:

That there is one God who made all things.
That he governs the World by his Providence.
That he ought to be worshipped by Adoration, Prayer and Thanksgiving.
But that the most acceptable Service of God is doing Good to Man.
That the soul is immortal.
And that God will certainly reward Virtue and punish Vice either here or hereafter. (p. 162)

Franklin takes the attitude that any principles beyond these are purely speculative and refuses to get embroiled in what he necessarily regards as fruitless controversy. This does not lead him to intolerance; rather, he considers his list to contain the "Essentials

of every known Religion." He insists he respects every religious belief he has encountered in America (except Keimer's?) and has indeed supported all that came to him for assistance (pp. 146–147).

Franklin's religious tolerance shares some of the characteristic paradoxes of American toleration. His own generic creed paves the way to maximum toleration; but it can have this effect only to the extent that others are brought, like him, to see all doctrines not in it as "nonessential." According to the creed, the divinity of Christ is nonessential,²¹ as are myriad doctrines less fundamental but more controversial in the American context. Moreover, Franklin's toleration is qualified by the social thrust of his own religious concern. He finds that individual sects are worthy of more or less respect, depending upon how well they support morality and social concord (1964, 146). Some doctrines might obviously detract from these, but Franklin has little patience even with those that do not contribute adequately to them. He tells us that when he realized that the minister of his own congregation desired "rather to make us Presbyterians than good Citizens," in disgust he stopped attending his services (p. 147).

What Franklin says about his experience with Deism seems to contain the key to his attitude. We recall that that experience taught him the overriding importance of "Truth, Sincerity and Integrity in Dealings between Man and Man." This ideal is fully visible in his own creed, and it is by this standard that he now judges at least the extraneous or supernumerary dogmas of all sects. As a result, Franklin's approach to religion is primarily social and moral—indeed, this-worldly rather than otherworldly. It is "reasonable" in the sense of taking its bearing by experience, by what is visible; and it brackets, as much as possible, all purely theological questions. In effect, he subjects religion to a test of social utility. Whether Franklin is an unalloyed utilitarian in religion is a subtle question, depending upon whether even his core religious principles are derived simply from his conviction that they are useful to society.

This question cannot be answered with certainty here—perhaps not anywhere. It does, however, allow us to understand something more about the important question of Franklin's utilitarianism. When explaining his attitude toward biblical revelation, for example, Franklin has the following to say: "I entertain'd an Opinion, that tho' certain Actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them; yet probably those Actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us, in their own Natures, all the Circumstances of things considered" (1964, 115). Thus, the Gospels' moral strictures are considered valid not as revealed truth but as principles of utility. And although Franklin specifically denies that his own religious principles are derived from revelation (pp. 114–15), he does apply the same kind of calculus to morals in general. Speaking of the treatise he intended to write on the

art of virtue, he says, "It was my Design to explain and enforce this Doctrine, that vicious Actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the Nature of Man alone consider'd: That it was therefore every one's Interest to be virtuous, who wish'd to be happy even in this World" (p. 158). These are the classic statements of Franklin's moral utilitarianism. Since they reduce morality and religion quite clearly to self-interest, they make Franklin appear to some to be nothing but a vulgar mercenary. But Franklin's argument harbors some subtleties that need to be noticed. Utilitarianism can take many forms; and the elevation or debasement of each depends upon the goods, or the vision of the human good, that it rests upon or is directed toward. Things can be judged "useful" or the reverse only with reference to these goods, considered as goals. As the second of these passages points out, the real issue is the nature of man and what truly conduces to his happiness. In the *Autobiography*, this passage follows a general account of the utility of the virtues to Franklin's own happiness, where he makes clear that for him, happiness includes prosperity and reputation, as well as learning and public service (p. 157). In the first passage, the proviso that moral actions are beneficial to us "all the Circumstances of things considered" seems also to allude to a rich understanding of the human good that underlies utility for Franklin. This passage is part of Franklin's account of his turn away from Deism and his adoption of the view that "Truth, Sincerity and Integrity in Dealings between Man and Man" are necessary to the felicity of life (p. 114). It is with reference to this ideal that religion, as well as virtue, are recommended as "useful" by Franklin in the *Autobiography*. In addition to its richness, his ideal fully connects the individual and the social good. But it is only adumbrated in these two passages; its full articulation is seen only in the portrait of Franklin's life as a whole in the *Autobiography*.

Utilitarianism, as Franklin envisions it, is anything but mercenary or impoverished, because the goal or purpose that drives it is generous and humane. In fact, Franklin might have found inspiration for it in the Socrates of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, which he encountered and admired at an early age, and which also makes use of utilitarian logic (Franklin 1964, 64, see also Xenophon *Memorabilia* 3.8, 4.1.1, 4.2.24–36 [1968]). Franklin might have found the inspiration for his reasonableness there, as well; for we may now say that this reasonableness represents a combination of metaphysical agnosticism with strong convictions about certain of the goods of life. The convictions are a product of combined observation and reasoning, and they serve to restrain metaphysical speculation in its excesses. It has been said that Franklin, in the thoroughgoing practicality of his approach to life, sacrificed reason to experience (Stourzh 1953, 1096; idem 1954, 9; see also Seavey 1988, 4). It is more appropriate to say that he concluded, in the face of the limits of speculation, that reason must take a

vision of the human good anchored more securely in experience as its first and guiding principle. For this reason Franklin might be considered among what William James called the forerunners or “preluders” of American pragmatism (James 1981, 27). James also identified Socrates as one of these preluders (*ibid.*). But Franklin would not endorse the development of a new metaphysics out of his approach. More importantly, he clearly regards his convictions or principles to be objective, not radically bound to his own experience. In this respect, he remains closer to the Socratic approach than to that of Pragmatism.

The indulgent or forgiving character of Franklin’s moral outlook, at least when measured against those of some of his critics, thus has two sources. The first is his utilitarianism. Every utilitarian approach to morals refuses to treat virtue as an end in itself, and Franklin quite frankly says that virtue and at least part of religion are normative only because they contribute to individual happiness and the social good. Franklin is fully aware of the character of his argument and how it diverges from other perspectives—pious perspectives, in particular. Yet much of the criticism he has faced—that which makes him a mercenary simply because he regards virtue as a means to something else—is rooted in precisely the “deontological” approach to morals he rejects (see Pangle 1988, 18). For Franklin, there is nothing more natural than for there to be a happy coincidence of virtue and utility and nothing more ill conceived than to propose a radical separation of the two.

In addition, Franklin’s distinctive vision of how extramoral human goals and appetites fit into a full and happy life makes his utilitarianism more indulgent than others’. For him, wealth, power, and reputation, as well as virtue, are legitimate parts of such a life. Here, the crucial contribution comes from Franklin’s own experience of the felicity of life, which has persuaded him that much more of human nature can safely be indulged than earlier moralists had thought. His good-humored concessions to his own lack of orderliness and pride, his view of chastity, and even his rejection of vegetarianism reflect Franklin’s assessment of how far moral strictures may be relaxed. This is reflected, as well, in the half-humorous proposal he once penned to devise scientific means of scenting intestinal gas so that flatulence might become socially acceptable ([1907] 1970 952–55). Franklin is at all times in favor of liberating innocuous natural impulses. The suppression of human appetites in the name of transcendent goals unrelated to human happiness simply appears nonsensical—unreasonable—to him. Reasonableness for Franklin consists precisely in affirming appetite where appetite contributes to human happiness and where nothing more than speculative grounds can be given for disturbing it. It is a kind of moderation directed against the excesses of moralism itself.

Franklin’s vision of the good life, which lies behind all of this, is the greatest unifying theme of the *Autobiography*. It is a vision that serves not only

individual happiness, but the good of society as a whole. But just as Franklin has altered our understanding of virtue to fit his vision of the good life, so he has thought his way to a new and distinctive view of the best social order and thus of the proper nature of sociability. A vision of society that combines in typical fashion benevolence and utility, together with a rather complicated egalitarianism, might be called the capstone of the *Autobiography* as a whole.

THE ART OF SOCIABILITY

If there is one thing that every reader of the *Autobiography* comes to admire and to envy in Franklin, it is his remarkable sociability. The facility with which he makes friends is a constant source of delight to his readers and an evident source of both delight and utility to himself. It is part of Franklin’s uniqueness to have been not only universally renowned but universally beloved in his own day.²² Still more remarkable was his amazing success in mastering all of the milieux he moved in—and these were as varied almost as the world had to offer—without being the less loved for it. From the Boston of his earliest youth, to the more freewheeling business and intellectual world of Philadelphia, to imperial London, and finally to the royal court of France, he displayed an unerring ability to influence events by the friendly force of his character. In all the machinations of his public career, he seems to have made only one serious misreading of men or events.²³ The *Autobiography*, which covers none of Franklin’s career as an international diplomatist, devotes considerable attention to his facility with people and aims to communicate something of that facility to us. In typical fashion, Franklin attributes his social success to a number of *techniques* and distills them into what amounts to an art of sociability that may be practiced by anyone. Also in typical fashion, this art looks to both pleasure and utility. The problems it is designed to overcome are partly those encountered by ordinary citizens and partly those confronted by men of superior achievement or ability who aspire to exert leadership in the novel circumstances of egalitarian society.

In the *Autobiography* Franklin portrays his sociability, like his reasonableness, as an acquisition or contrivance, rather than as something native to him. In some ways, the two are sides of a coin. His early encounter with books of “polemic Divinity” led him not only to the intellectual vice of dogmatism but to the social vice of contentiousness—a defect rarely found in men of good sense, Franklin says, “except Lawyers, University Men, and Men of all Sorts that have been bred at Edinborough” (1964, 60). With this turn of mind, all he seems to have gained from his first encounter with Xenophon’s Socrates was proficiency in the method of confuting people by innocent-seeming questions (pp. 64–65). He combined mastery of this method with his youthful religious

skepticism—to his own delight but the consternation (and alarm) of others. Franklin says that his eristic activity eventually made him notorious enough to be “pointed at with Horror by good People” in Boston (p. 71). He left Boston partly in order to escape this bad reputation and gradually gave up his pugnacious method of dispute, retaining only the Socratic habit of expressing himself less positively in argument, replacing words such as *certainly* or *undoubtedly* with expressions like *I conceive*, *I apprehend*, or *I imagine* (p. 65).

After his change of manner, Franklin says, his conversations went on much more pleasantly. But this was more than a modification of speaking style. It became also a change in Franklin's whole approach to social relations, away from confrontation and toward accommodation. This new sociability was motivated by the hope of doing good, as well as receiving pleasure. Championing his less assertive mode of speech, Franklin says:

This Habit I Believe has been of great Advantage to me, when I have had occasion to inculcate my Opinions and persuade Men into Measures that I have been from time to time engag'd in promoting. And as the chief Ends of Conversation are to *inform*, or to be *informed*, to *please* or to *persuade*, I wish wellmeaning sensible Men would not lessen their Power of doing Good by a Positive assuming Manner that seldom fails to disgust, tends to create Opposition, and to defeat every one of those Purposes for which Speech was given to us. (1964, 65)

This remarkable passage not only informs us of the true purposes of speech but gives us implicitly a vision of the proper social order. That order is closely bound up with speech and its purposes. Speech brings pleasure, conveys information, and makes persuasion possible. Potentially a great power of social good, it is too often abused and deflected from its proper use. Franklin's art of sociability therefore rests heavily on a self-conscious reform of men's use of their faculty of speech.

The principal obstacle to proper sociability is pride. Arrogant habits of speech block all its potential for good, disrupting society, as well as the genuine pleasure of conversation. Franklin's own experience has taught him the tenacity of this problem. He admits that when he was developing his art of virtue, it took the prodding of a Quaker friend to get him to add the virtue of humility to his list. He made it his thirteenth virtue and in this context associates it primarily with modesty in speech (1964, 159). He also confesses to the difficulty of acquiring it: humility forces him to forgo the “pleasure” of immediately contradicting others' errors, a discipline that does “some violence to natural Inclination” (ibid.).

Due to this difficulty, Franklin informs us, he has not truly succeeded in acquiring humility, only its appearance. But for social purposes (what concerns Franklin primarily here) this has been perfectly adequate. Under the virtue of humility, Franklin had written “Imitate Jesus and Socrates” (1964, 150); but it seems that in this respect his *imitatio Christi* is con-

finied to externals. One reason why Franklin accepts this with such good humor is that neither his view of individual virtue nor of social relations is one from which all pride or even vanity has been purged. That would require a sterner discipline than Franklin is willing to impose, especially since he finds redeeming elements in human pride, beginning with his own. At the onset of the *Autobiography* he admits (“since my Denial of it will be believ'd by no body”) that the work is motivated partly by vanity. But vanity, he says, is something he has learned to indulge, since it “is often productive of Good to the Possessor and to others that are within his Sphere of Action,” as well as being one of the “Comforts of Life” (p. 144). As always, the combination of private pleasure and social utility is an irresistible one for Franklin. The problems with pride arise largely because of misconceptions on the part of its possessors. As Franklin says in the early essay in which he lionizes Cato, the major problem with man's “strong natural Desire of being valu'd and esteem'd” is simply that too few know the best way of gratifying it, namely, through virtue ([1907], 1970, vol. 2, p. 108).

The social order as Franklin conceives of it is based more on the proper education of vanity and its mutual accommodation by members of society than on its suppression. Showing vanity how useful virtue is to its gratification (one of the themes of the *Autobiography* as a whole) is a part of its education. Franklin's exhortations to modest speech for the sake of both pleasure and social concord is another part of its education. But since Franklin does not imagine that harmful pride can be so easily brooked, further accommodation is required. Thus, among other things, he admonishes us all, under the heading of “Moderation,” “Forbear resenting Injuries so much as you think they deserve” (1964, 150). Pride overvalues slights and overvalues its own desert; and those who are concerned about social accommodation will therefore control their own pride, while giving others' wider berth. This kind of moderation is perfectly captured in a subtle emendation Franklin proposes in the *Autobiography* to a famous poetic couplet. Instead of writing “Immodest Words admit of no Defence; / For Want of Modesty is Want of Sense,” (p. 66).²⁴ Franklin suggests the poet should have written, “Immodest Words admit *but this* Defence, / That Want of Modesty is Want of Sense.” Franklin takes the view that immodesty is caused by ignorance and in a spirit of Socratic generosity maintains that ignorance provides some excuse for vice.

Franklin's view of sociability, resting on modesty of speech, cultivation of at least the outward forms of humility, and indulgence of mistaken pride in others, is appropriate, especially in the new kind of society Franklin was attempting to shape. In modern democratic or egalitarian society, as much pride must be indulged in each as civility will bear. Special forbearance will be practiced by those who take the lead in sociability, as Franklin hopes each of his readers will

do. But Franklin is the last to think this will be the way with all and is fully aware that those who take such a lead will likely be a minority. The problem of sociability thus opens something of a breach in the smoothly democratic exterior of the *Autobiography*—a breach that becomes wider and more significant, the closer one looks; for out of the art of sociability Franklin develops an art of leadership that is egalitarian in its benevolence toward the public at large but is more exclusive in its audience. In his praise of modest speech, Franklin had put special emphasis on the “Power of doing Good” that modesty would place in the hands of “wellmeaning sensible Men” (1964, 65). These men are like Franklin in his capacity as a projector and a leader—as something other than Everyman. Franklin notes that the humble manner of speech and demeanor he developed was vital not only in smoothing his social relations but in advancing the many projects he undertook during his life and in taking the lead in practical affairs in general (p. 160). It not only brought him good will but allowed him to draw men along by persuasion, without bruising their pride or vanity.

If sociability in a democratic context requires special attention to the universalized claims of pride, the exercise of leadership compounds the difficulties. Leadership, which always requires the careful management of human vanity, is given special delicacy in the democratic milieu as Franklin understands it. Every man demands—and merits—respect; and the leader cannot proceed peremptorily. But Franklin does not take the democratic perspective so exclusively as to think this is the only problem, nor does he think democratic leadership should concern itself only with accommodating the pride of followers. There is also the legitimate pride of the leader. Franklin’s own pride is concealed but not conquered; and it stands to reason that the “future great men,” for whose benefit, among others, Benjamin Vaughan exhorted Franklin to publish his *Autobiography* (1964, 135), will be at least as proud. In order to put this problem in its proper perspective we must first realize that in predemocratic Western societies (indeed, in the London and Paris of Franklin’s experience) such pride was an unquestioned virtue. Under the name of honor, it forms, in fact, the keystone of every aristocratic social order. Franklin is willing, in self-effacing democratic fashion, to call the leader’s pride “vanity” and accommodate it to the new social circumstances for which he is writing. But he is not willing to sacrifice it on the altar of egalitarianism. If vanity in its ordinary forms, properly directed, can be productive of much good, the pride that will motivate future Franklins is even more to be cherished. The difficulty is to satisfy both, to give scope to the leader’s pride without offending that of his followers.

This cannot be done without a certain amount of subterfuge, and that is one of the things Franklin’s art of sociable democratic leadership provides. When seeking supporters for an early project of his, Franklin discovered that resistance was created by the suppo-

sition that the project’s success would raise his reputation even “the smallest degree” above that of his followers (1964, 143). Here, democratic pride is seen in its ugly form as resentment. Franklin did not, and does not, believe this resentment can simply be done away with, so he developed a ruse for concealing his leadership to get around it. By presenting schemes as the idea of “a number of friends” or of “some *publick-spirited Gentlemen*” who seek wider support, he advises us, opposition rooted in envy or distrust of ambition can be forestalled. He recommends this device to any who would lead effectively (pp. 143, 193). The vanity of followers is assuaged, and the leader’s projects go forward more smoothly; but the real beauty of this device, Franklin assures us, is that in the end there is no real sacrifice of the leader’s pride: “If it remains a while uncertain to whom the Merit belongs, some one more vain than yourself will be encourag’d to claim it, and then even envy will be dispos’d to do you Justice, by plucking those assum’d Feathers, and restoring them to their right Owner” (p. 143). If Franklin is to be thought of as the apostle of postponed gratification, this might be the best example of it in the *Autobiography*. Precisely by adopting a low profile in deference to the pride of others—by being humble in appearance—the leader garners the praise he wants and deserves. Franklin believes this and devices like it to be necessary to effective leadership in the circumstances he—and we—confront.

The *Autobiography* gives us enough examples of this kind of self-concealment to make it a theme of the work. His first published essays were submitted anonymously to his brother’s newspaper, to gain them a fair hearing (1964, 67–68). His long-standing intellectual club, the Junto, was a semisecret organization. Along with ancillary clubs established on the same model, Franklin says the Junto was useful as means of preparing the public mind for projects he later wished to take in hand (pp. 170–71, 173–74). He once formed a plan for a larger group to be called the Society of the Free and Easy, which was to begin as a secret party whose members had trained themselves in his art of virtue and subscribed to his religious creed and who would, in unison, have an impact on public affairs (pp. 161–63). Franklin claims this group was never formed; but he still believes it useful and possible, “as I have always thought that one man of tolerable Abilities may work great Changes, and accomplish great Affairs among Mankind, if he first forms a good Plan” and prosecutes it assiduously to its conclusion (p. 163). This particular plan began with the formation of a secret elite.

The culmination of Franklin’s instruction in sociability is an exhortation to public service addressed to everyone; but the most productive kind of public service is carried out by a man who is willing to take the lead while operating within the constraints of the new social setting. Franklin brings a thoroughly democratic sensibility to public service, but he does not blind himself to the fact that the new conditions are

constraints. Franklin's leader operates often by stealth, using devices that we would almost call manipulative but for the spirit in which Franklin employs them. The concealments always fall within Franklin's definition of *sincerity*, "[to] Use no hurtful Deceit" (1964, 150). The deceits he recommends always have the purpose of removing obstacles to projects of public benefit. Yet here, unquestionably, the distance between Franklin and his followers—or between Franklin and most of his audience in the *Autobiography*—is greatest. Despite a spirit of infinite benevolence, Franklin's innocently deceitful way of making his way as a leader through the social milieu bespeaks a certain degree of detachment and even of irony toward his fellows. Paradoxically, in the *Autobiography*, as in many of his writings, Franklin holds himself partly in reserve in order to serve the public—and himself—better.

In his *Autobiography*, as in his life, Franklin cultivates a peculiar mixture of intimacy and distance, transparency and concealment. But Franklin's irony, if Socratic in spirit, is not Socratic in extent. Franklin is a democrat and cannot, for all his irony, be portrayed as an esoteric elitist in the classical sense. In most respects he makes himself and his views completely known to his readers (see Morgan 1991). In the *Autobiography* Franklin makes a deliberate effort to portray himself as a model American, imitable by all of his fellow countrymen. His lessons on effective leadership are a partial exception to this. But of all the deceptions or concealments we might find in the *Autobiography*, the most thoroughgoing is Franklin's downplaying of the aspects of his life and activity that put him too far above the average man. This is especially true in the field of intellectual achievement. Though Franklin makes much of his lifelong love of books and of writing, the *Autobiography* uses these things by and large to convey lessons about diligence and the advantages intellectual cultivation might bring to anyone, not to show how Franklin became an internationally renowned thinker and essayist. Similarly, though Franklin mentions his work with electricity, work for which he was already famous when he began the *Autobiography* and that was by and large complete by time of the latest events narrated in the *Autobiography*, it, too, figures in the work mostly as a demonstration of the kinds of virtues the work's wider audience may aspire to. It is one of the non-commercial pursuits that Franklin retires from business for (1964, 196) and provides an instance of his refusing to embroil himself in unnecessary disputes (pp. 243–44). When his scientific inventiveness leads to the development of his "Pennsylvania Fireplace," he emphasizes primarily that he declined the patent on it and on other inventions, out of generosity to mankind (p. 192). In the end, the *Autobiography* gives us a hero who is more ordinary than Franklin himself actually was.

The *Autobiography* breaks off in the year 1757, around the time when Franklin was becoming a national and international statesman, that is, the time

when his public career was beginning to take him decisively beyond the aspirations of the ordinary citizen. Franklin did not intend to stop the work there,²⁵ but this ending point suits very well the didactic purpose of the work as we have it. The Franklin thus bequeathed to posterity is not quite the historical Franklin (as all his biographers know). But the *Autobiography* is not biography in the rigorous sense. It is, rather, an effort to construct a new model American. Franklin was one of the few to embrace modern egalitarian society in its infancy and to try to shape it. And he wishes us to become, as much as possible, like he has made himself—combining the maximum of both virtue and prosperity and contributing to a society graced with both benevolence and charm.

Notes

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1. For general accounts of the history of the work's reputation, see Buxbaum 1987; Miles 1957; Sayre 1963, intro.

2. For the view that Franklin is a Puritan, see Griswold 1965; see also Sanford 1965.

3. See Adams 1955; see also Miles 1957, 118–19, and Miroff 1986, esp. 128. Adams was one of very few to regard even Washington's reputation as unjustified.

4. Miles (1957) speaks of the tradition of Franklin-bashing carried on by what he calls the "Neanderthal wing" of the Federalist party into the nineteenth century. See also Labaree's citations of Charles Francis Adams in Franklin 1964, 14–15.

5. Lawrence wrote two versions of his critique of Franklin, one in 1918 and one in 1923 (Lawrence 1987 and 1964, chap. 4, respectively). The first is more temperate, the second more widely known.

6. See, e.g., the collection *Benjamin Franklin on Education* (Franklin 1962).

7. See the letters Franklin had reprinted at the beginning of part 2 (1964, 133–40); see also the letter from Franklin to Vaughan after he had completed most or all of the *Autobiography* as we have it (Franklin [1907] 1970, vol. 9, pp. 675–77).

8. The four parts of the *Autobiography* were written at three different times in widely differing places (part 1 at Twyford estate, England, 1771; part 2 at Passy, near Paris, 1784; and parts 3 and 4 in Philadelphia at the very end of Franklin's life, 1788 and after). This has led some to find differences of tone, outlook, and intent among the different parts of the work. I believe variations of tone may be found among the parts, but not of outlook or intent.

9. Although Franklin did not commit himself to democracy as a *political* form until rather late (he was a monarchist, though of a radical Whiggish stamp, for most of his life), his egalitarianism was constant. By the time of his participation in the Federal Convention of 1787, he was more populist than most of the members of that body. See Franklin [1907] 1970, 590–604. See also Farrand 1937, vol. 1, pp. 48, 77–78, 81–85; *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 542; *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 297; Rossiter 1952; Stourzh 1953, 1107–14.

10. This was first printed as a preface to the *Poor Richard's Almanac* of 1758. It is also known as *Father Abraham's Speech*. See Franklin [1907] 1970, vol. 3, 407–18. Reprintings of this were immensely popular not only in America but in England and on the continent (see Franklin 1964, 164).

11. Most interpreters of Franklin agree that Lawrence took far too narrow a view of Franklin's teaching. See, e.g., Lerner 1988, chap. 1; Miles 1957, 142; Rossiter 1952, 281; Sayre 1963;

Schneider 1955; Seavey 1988. For another critique of Franklin, see Angoff 1955; see also Lemay 1982.

12. Something of Franklin's understanding of his audience can be seen in a pamphlet he wrote in France in February 1784 entitled *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America* ([1907] 1970, 975–83). The pamphlet's message is that prosperity comes surely to those who work in America but that there is no prospect for idlers, placeholders, or courtiers.

13. Tocqueville speaks, for example, of the American doctrine of "self-interest rightly understood" (1969, vol. 2, pt. 2, chap. 8).

14. The essay was originally published in the *American Weekly Mercury* of February 18, 1729, when Franklin was 23. It is true that the image of Cato had been both appropriated and altered by the London literary culture that the young Franklin idolized; but the Cato of this essay is the Cato of Plutarch, not of Trenchard and Gordon. On the "Cato cult" in England and America at this period, see Bailyn 1967, chap. 2; MacDonald 1985, 190–95. On its nonclassical elements, see Pangle 1988, 30–33.

15. The vulgar Nietzscheanism embraced by Lawrence in his critique of Franklin is considerably more dangerous and irresponsible than the sober moderation of Franklin.

16. For yet another instance of this sentiment, see Franklin's letter to Mary Hewson of May 6, 1786, where he excuses his idle cardplaying with the reflection that his immortal soul has enough time lying before it: "So, being easily convinced, and, like other reasonable creatures, satisfied with a small reason, when it is in favour of doing what I have a mind to, I shuffle the cards again, and begin another game" ([1907] 1970, vol. 9, pp. 510–13). This kind of ironic appeal to reason was obviously a favorite with Franklin, but its irony masks a serious reflection.

17. The whole address is a meditation on this theme.

18. Franklin supported proposals for an executive council, an executive without pay, and a unicameral legislature. See Farrand 1937, vol. 1, pp. 48, 77–78, 81–85; *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 542; *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 297. He was, however, instrumental in fashioning the compromise on representation by states and by population (vol. 1, pp. 488–89; *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 470–73).

19. Alexander Pope, one of Franklin's favorite authors, produced the famous couplet on this theme: "For forms of government let fools contest; / Whate'er is best administered is best" (*Essay on Man* 3.303–4). The succeeding couplet could serve as motto for Franklin's attitude toward religion: "For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight; / His can't be wrong whose life is in the right."

20. Franklin also says he never doubted either that God governs the world with his providence or that the best service to God is service to man. Yet his *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* at least comes very close to denying these things. When speaking about what the notoriously elusive and ironic Franklin actually believed in religious matters, we must be on our guard. Here, especially, we might be mindful of the loophole in his definition of the virtue of sincerity, "Use no hurtful Deceit" (1964, 150).

21. In a letter to Ezra Stiles of March 9, 1790, very near the end of his life, Franklin repeats his religious principles. In response to a query by Stiles, he allows that the "System of Morals" propounded by Jesus is "the best the World ever saw or is likely to see" but that his divinity "is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble" ([1907] 1970, vol. 10, pp. 83–85).

22. Consider the following testimonial—from John Adams, no less: "[His fame] was more universal than that of Leibnitz or Newton, Frederick or Voltaire, and his character more beloved and esteemed than any of them" (quoted in Stourzh 1954, 2).

23. I am thinking of the affair of the Hutchinson letters, which is not covered by the *Autobiography*. Franklin evidently believed that the divulgence of these letters to selected men in Boston would cool passions there in 1772–73, but it actually had the opposite result. He got into serious trouble in

London, where he was living as a colonial agent at the time. See Van Doren [1936] 1964, 444–78; Willcox 1987, 105–8. Franklin's course as a youth in Boston was not entirely smooth, which taught him some important lessons. His overall success in his public career, of course, did not preclude his making enemies—as was inevitable, especially in London during the years of revolutionary ferment.

24. Franklin falsely attributes this couplet to Alexander Pope (1964, 66n.). He also misquotes the second line, substituting *Modesty* for the *Decency* of the original.

25. Franklin was working on the *Autobiography* up to the time of his death, and an outline he prepared for it (1964, 267–72) extends chronologically much beyond the point where the work breaks off.

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