

Benjamin Franklin “Project for Moral Perfection”

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I. About the Author

As the youngest son of the youngest son for five generations back, Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) was by custom and tradition destined to be a nobody. Yet thanks to his own resourcefulness, he more than escaped his destiny. His life spanned the eighteenth century, and he managed to see and to participate firsthand in much that it had to offer.

Reared in Boston, Franklin struck out on his own at age seventeen to escape traditional and familial authority, arriving in Philadelphia alone and without any visible means of support. By age twenty-four, he had established his own printing business. Thereafter, in fairly short order, he entered public life and established his indispensability, first to his city, then to his country, and then to the world. He achieved worldwide fame for his writings and statesmanship, his scientific discoveries and inventions, and his philanthropy—or, as he preferred to call it, his “usefulness” as a citizen.

We are indebted to Franklin for many things, including the invention of bifocals, street lamps, the one-arm desk chair, the fireplace damper, and the “Franklin” stove; the founding of the first public library, the first fire insurance company, the University of Pennsylvania, and the American Philosophical Society; and his vast service to our new nation, as delegate, counselor, author, and diplomat.

By all measures, Benjamin Franklin was no ordinary man—not in his own time, not in any time. Yet when he sat down, during the last twenty years of his life, to write his autobiography (a work written in four different spurts), he crafted an account of himself and his life which seems intended to serve as a model for every American, then and now: He addressed his audience as “Dear Son,” that is, as one extended family; he omits

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mention of nearly all of his great accomplishments; he speaks in an engaging and light-hearted manner that hides his own superiority. His “bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (found in Part II of the *Autobiography*) is clearly written as a model that others would do well to imitate. It is the only project that the great Projector turned on himself, and he attributes his own happiness and worldly success to its virtues and methods. With characteristic understatement, he expresses the hope that “some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefits.”

II. Summary

Writing the *Autobiography* in his seventy-ninth year, Franklin looks back—almost “once upon a time”—to when, at age twenty-two, he undertook “the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection.” He wanted to live without committing any fault. He wanted to conquer all that natural inclination, custom and tradition, or the company of others might lead him to wrongly do. He wanted, in short, to reform himself, by himself, to possess full self-command. Alas, he discovered that this was no easy task. Bad habits and wayward inclinations continued to lead him astray. He therefore decided to undertake a more methodical approach.

He prepared a list of thirteen virtues that he considered either necessary or desirable. To each named virtue, he affixed a short precept that, he says, “fully express’d the Extent I gave to its Meaning” (2). Eager to attain the habit of each of these virtues, he set up a regimen whereby he would concentrate on one virtue at a time, devoting a week to the practice of each, before going on to the next. There being thirteen virtues, he managed to perform four thirteen-week programs a year, a practice he continued for many years until his busy life rendered it inconvenient. The order of the virtues, dictated in part by the fact that the prior acquisition of some of the virtues would make easier the acquisition of the next, is as follows: (1) temperance, (2) silence, (3) order, (4) resolution, (5) frugality, (6) industry, (7) sincerity, (8) justice, (9) moderation, (10) cleanliness, (11) tranquility, (12) chastity, and (13) humility. To aid in his practice, he prepared a little book in which he recorded his daily successes or failures with each of the virtues. He also devised a daily schedule, which helped him give each part of his business its allotted and proper time.

Summing up his progress and success, Franklin reports that he never did arrive at moral perfection and, indeed, “fell far short of it” (7). Nevertheless, he claims that he was a better and happier man than if he had never attempted the project. Moreover, he relates specific benefits that he has enjoyed as a result, both of some particular virtues and of the

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entire package: felicity, health, prosperity, knowledge, reputation, the confidence of his country and the offices conferred upon him, and the even temper and cheerful conversation that made everyone seek his company. He here invites his readers to imitate him and to reap the same benefits.

III. Thinking about the Text

Franklin's project at first glance seems designed to achieve a self-defined self-perfection, entirely by his own efforts: He is to become a self-made, self-commanding, and self-sufficient person. At the same time, however, he calls attention to how his acquisition of self-command made possible his many opportunities for public service and civic achievement. And he also touches both directly and indirectly on certain traditional religious teachings, with which he is explicitly and tacitly in conversation.

A. "The Bold and Arduous Project for Arriving at Moral Perfection"

1. What is a "Project"? What does it mean to have a project? What does it mean to turn oneself into a project?
2. What is "moral Perfection"? Is this a reasonable goal for a human being? Is it possible for anyone to attain moral perfection? How does Franklin's aspiration relate to Jesus's teaching "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48)? In pursuing this project, is Franklin fulfilling or departing from this injunction?
3. What is bold about this project? What assumptions about human nature, human (original) sinfulness, and human perfectibility are implied?
4. What is arduous about this project? Why is it so hard? What is implied in Franklin's remark that removing his faults was like weeding a garden (5)? What does the very difficulty of such a project say about our nature as human beings?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Franklin's project with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and Wilfred McClay, the SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

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Amy Kass: To say that the project is arduous would suggest that it really is toilsome. Later on in the description Franklin uses the image of a garden and weeding, that this project for moral perfection is like weeding a garden. This conception suggests that the project is not something that is being done for its own sake, but is being done for the sake of something else. But even more interesting is that the project is bold. Why is it bold? It's bold because the very title, "The Project for Moral Perfection," has a Christian resonance to it, and I suspect that he is identifying and clearly separating himself from that Christian tradition. Saint Matthew reminds us to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," but Franklin's assumption here is utterly different. He seems to suggest that human beings are not by nature sinful creatures or willfully evil creatures, but that human beings are just wayward because they have bad habits.

Diana Schaub: In a certain sense, though, for a Christian this project might be a little bit easier, because one would have the assistance of divine grace and prayer. One reason why this is so arduous is because it does rely entirely on Franklin's own efforts.

Leon Kass: Right, this is a project of self-command by one's own self-exertions. He has a table for daily examination in which he gives himself bad, black marks for when he slips up on each of the virtues. He does not rely on anything beyond himself and his own self-criticisms.

Diana Schaub: While he does leave himself without certain resources that are available to those who believe in the Christian revelation, in another sense, it is also easier for him because what he finds is not sin, but "errata"—something a bit more superficial. And as a printer himself, he knows that "errata" can be corrected.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

5. Do you think you could ever attain a state of moral perfection? Why or why not? Is it still worth seeking even if you can never grasp it fully?

B. The Thirteen Virtues and the Method for Attaining Them

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1. What is a virtue? How does a morality that emphasizes virtue differ from one that emphasizes rules (or commandments) about right and wrong acts?
2. Consider each virtue in turn, with its explanatory precepts (2–3). Does each make sense? Do you find the precepts adequate? (For example, Franklin’s precept for Sincerity includes, “Use no hurtful deceit.” Is this a good—or good enough—teaching for sincere speech?) Are there any virtues missing?
3. According to Franklin, what good are these virtues? Is virtue its own reward? Or does it lead to other, more important goods and benefits?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: I think the key idea for Franklin is that these are virtues that allow one to become a free, responsible individual who can provide for himself, can get along with other people, can contribute both to his private and familial happiness, as well as to the public good. Through temperance, Franklin acquires that kind of coolness and clearness of mind that is required for doing just about anything you want to do in life. Silence, as he says, enables him to learn from other people. Then order: anything that you want to do is certainly helped along by certain orderliness in your habits. Resolution: resolve to do what you ought, and then perform what you resolve. There are lots of people that have good intentions, but if they lack resolution they cannot do anything.

And then you have the virtues that have to do with wealth and industry: frugality, so that you do not waste what you have, and industry so that you can provide for yourself and be responsible. Then sincerity and justice. If you have economic independence, you do not have to look around enviously at what other people have; it is a lot easier to have innocent thoughts and speak accordingly, and to do your duty to your neighbor. And finally, he lists moderation. Avoid extremes. And very importantly, do not resent those injuries done to you as much as you think they deserve to be resented. That is a guide against wounded pride and anger, the presence of which destroys communal relations. The result is an admirable, responsible citizen who is not on the public dole, who gets along with other people, is a good family man, a good provider, a good member of civic organizations. He is a good all-around citizen. Though there might be some things missing, if more people were like Franklin, the world would be a much better place.

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4. What do you think of Franklin's method for acquiring the virtues, including cataloguing them in his little book? If you were to try to improve your own character, would you adopt Franklin's strategy? Why or why not?
5. Is Franklin's "Scheme of Employment for the Twenty-four Hours of a Natural Day" a useful (or even necessary) means for making the project effective (5)? What are the benefits of such a scheme? In what areas does it fall short? How would you—could you?—accomplish the project without it?

C. Motives, Purposes, Results

1. Why did young Franklin undertake this project?
2. What are the project's goals and purposes: for Franklin, the hero of the story? For us, the readers of the story?
3. What were the results for Franklin? What did he achieve from it?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: Even though he does not attain moral perfection, and in fact he fails in many respects, Franklin still credits this project with the fact that he became a much happier and better human being than he would otherwise have been. And he recommends this project to his descendants, that they should emulate him and reap the benefits.

Diana Schaub: The virtues he actually acquires are an unstated list of virtues, like tolerance, or accommodation to others. So for instance, with order, he says that it proved very, very difficult for him to bring order to his life, that he isn't a very orderly person. But then he also makes the point that the reason he could never stick to that order he had listed for the day was because other people have their own plans for the day, so that he sometimes had to depart from his order in order to conduct his business with them in a way that accommodated them. So, in fact, it seems that there is a kind of second set of virtues here embedded in the

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first that is a result of the failure of some of the stated virtues.

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4. Does Franklin become a fully self-made man? A fully free man? A person with full self-command?
5. How might his own self-command relate to his success in the world? To his service to his country?

D. Franklin's Humor and Irony

1. Franklin's account of his project, though serious in intent, is sprinkled throughout (as is the entire *Autobiography*) with humor and irony. (Look carefully, for example, at some of the precepts, at the anecdote about the speckled axe, and at his final comments on pride and humility.) What is irony? What are other examples of humor or irony in the story? Why do you think he uses both humor and irony?
2. What is the relation between the serious and the ironic or humorous elements in Franklin's account?
3. How might that mixture serve Franklin's overall purposes?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: Franklin uses humor and irony, in part, because he thinks that to be in command of yourself is perfectly compatible with accepting yourself. He says the virtue he has the most difficulty with is order. But then he lets himself off the hook—"a speckled axe is best"—so it seems that he is self-accepting at the same time as he is trying to achieve a certain kind of self-command.

Leon Kass: To have self-command is not easy for a human being. But Franklin's is a kind of self-command that is compatible with self-satisfaction, and with the realization of one's goals and having true self-esteem. It is not a matter of self-

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flagellation or self-denial.

I think that explains, in part, his light touch here. One should be serious about his character—but not *too* serious. Having a sense of humor about yourself is one of the ways to get on in this world with other people. It makes civil life possible.

Wilfred McClay: The American model for the great man is the uncommon, common man. Abraham Lincoln was perhaps the greatest of all, and Harry Truman fit this mold in a way.

Franklin seems to be an early proponent of this view. I think he is partly, with his discussion of order, trying to charm us. He is like that person that says, “Well, you shouldn’t drink. But I occasionally have a nip myself.” It both affirms the precept, but affirms the falling away from time to time.

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IV. Thinking with the Text

We have already noted that the Franklin who is the protagonist of the *Autobiography* differs from the Franklin who *writes* it: protagonist Franklin lacks much of the superiority of author Franklin. This device is, we suggest, part of the author’s rhetorical strategy for enabling the reader to identify with—and to wish to emulate—the “hero” of the book.

If this is correct, then Franklin is doing something more than merely telling us his life story. He is trying to educate future generations of Americans toward becoming better, happier, and more useful citizens of the United States. He is trying to prepare them to become, like him, a man capable of both personal and political self-government—in a word, to become free. (In Middle English, the word “frank” means “to be free”; hence to become a “Franklin” is, literally, to become a free man.) Accordingly, when we think with the text—and not just *about* the text—we should think about the implication of Franklin’s teachings (both in content and in manner) for America and for the American character and its education.

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A. Human Being and Citizen

1. What do you think a person who attained all of the thirteen virtues would be like?
2. Would such a person make a good neighbor?
3. Would such a person make a good citizen?
4. Is it possible to be a good citizen in our self-governing nation without first governing oneself? Can one be a “free human being” without self-command?
5. Is Franklin right in implying that it is possible to harmonize self-fulfillment (or concern with one’s own personal happiness) and good citizenship? Or does being a good citizen (civic virtue) require self-denial?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: It seems to me that Franklin thinks that if your own house is in order, which is his first priority, then you are capable, if you are interested, in doing things for others.

Humanly speaking, quite apart from Franklin, if you are so preoccupied, so weighed down by your own debts and your own vices and your own inclinations and desires, you never notice the other people that are around you. And Franklin gives you a very handy recipe for getting your house in order.

Leon Kass: This point could be embellished this way: human beings are naturally sociable. The question is, in what manner are you going to be sociable? Are you going to be sociable in a way in which you are looking upon other people as instruments of your own gain and advancement? Or are you going to be free from the kinds of necessities that make you think only in selfish terms—so that you understand that it is in your own interest also to be sociable, philanthropic, generous, and benevolent? I think these are the virtues that are controlling the obstacles to being a free man in a free, self-governing community.

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B. The Virtues of Civic Life

1. Has Franklin provided a necessary and sufficient moral framework for educating free, self-governing citizens in a modern commercial society? What virtues would you add, delete, or replace, for citizens of twenty-first-century America? What about courage and self-sacrifice or generosity or reverence? What about compassion and public spiritedness? Is self-command sufficient to induce the willingness to serve one's neighbors or one's community and country?
2. How do the Franklinian virtues compare to more traditional (especially Judeo-Christian) conceptions of virtue and morality? Are his virtues compatible with or supportive of the religious virtues? Or do they undermine them?

IN CONVERSATION

Wilfred McClay: Virtue is clearly not its own reward in Franklin's scheme. When you come to the end of our selection, he points to the felicity of his first seventy-nine years as the justification for the project and for the pursuit of virtue. And that is part of the appeal of the project—a self-interest-rightly-understood approach to attaining virtue. But there may be virtues like sacrifice, or extreme forms of courage, that simply cannot be accounted for in that way. Is anything lost by Franklin's way of tallying things up?

Amy Kass: Yes and no. If we remember, Franklin has two virtues for moderation: One is temperance, and one is moderation. And that really is no accident. What he, I think, was most afraid of was fanaticism—fanaticism of any form. And that might be a reason that courage is not included in this.

Diana Schaub: What he says about moderation seems to be working against those who are in the grips of manly pride or manly honor, people who take offense readily and are quick to anger. Franklin really wants to get that under control in this new order. Moderation is a virtue that is perhaps more associated with women than with men, and he gives a special pride of place to this virtue.

Leon Kass: It is true that Franklin is trying to shift away from fanatical religious

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teachings which divide people and produce civil disorder and worse. But, on the other hand, he writes his own prayer to address a powerful goodness. He has some kind of deistic view. But I wonder if he has not left out something that is terribly important both for private and public life.

Amy Kass: I think one of the questions about religion has to do with the way in which he talks about moderation. Forbearance becomes very important. And you could say that that is feminizing moderation and that it is instead of courage. But this moderation is certainly compatible with a certain religious attitude of turning the other cheek. Many of his assumptions, though, are radically different from the Christian conception; to Franklin, human beings are not sinners by nature. But I do not think he would suggest that hope or faith or charity are virtues that one ought not to cultivate.

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3. In *What So Proudly We Hail*, this reading appears in the chapter on the Virtues of Civic Life, in the section on the virtue of self-command and self-respect. Is self-command really necessary or desirable for American citizens today? Why or why not?
4. Is Franklin's list of virtues suitable—and possible—for every American, regardless of race, class, or gender?

C. Teaching Good Character

1. What is the best way to acquire good habits and to develop virtuous character? Should Franklin's methods be imitated today?
2. Does humor—and the ability to laugh at oneself—have a role to play in moral education? In civic life? What is it, and why?