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0521542650 - Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics,
Economics, and Virtue

Edited by Alan Houston

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FRANKLIN: *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY* AND
OTHER WRITINGS ON POLITICS, ECONOMICS,
AND VIRTUE

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) is one of the best-known and least-understood figures in the history of eighteenth-century political thought. Though a man of extraordinary intellectual accomplishment, he was an occasional writer who left no major treatise. Though the author of essays and pamphlets on a wide range of topics, he is often known only through his two most famous productions, the *Autobiography* and *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Though a pivotal actor in and keen observer of colonial and revolutionary American politics, Franklin has resisted classification using the terms of contemporary historical analysis; he is neither classical republican nor Lockean liberal.

The present volume provides the textual foundation for a comprehensive reassessment of Franklin's political thought. Alan Houston makes available, for the first time, a full and representative selection of Franklin's most important political writings. He pairs a new edition of the *Autobiography* with letters, essays, pamphlets, and manuscript notes on topics ranging from political economy, moral psychology, religious belief and practice, voluntary association, and the public sphere of news and communication, to the dynamics of international migration and the design of political institutions. Through these texts Franklin emerges as an active participant in debates over the modern commercial republic.

ALAN HOUSTON is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego.

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Introduction

Benjamin Franklin's life-story is legendary. The youngest son and fifteenth child of a Boston tallow chandler and soap boiler, he received only two years' formal education before being apprenticed to his brother, a local printer. But by the time of his death he was world-famous for his accomplishments. A writer of wit, grace and intelligence, he crafted a series of complex and distinct literary voices. An experimental scientist, he conducted original research on electricity, was elected to the Royal Society, and founded the first scientific society in North America. A practical engineer, he invented the lightning rod, bifocal glasses, and the first truly efficient wood-burning stove. A born improver, he fathered the first subscription library, the first volunteer fire department, and the first charity hospital. A political leader in colonial Pennsylvania and revolutionary America, he helped draft the Declaration of Independence, represented the United States in negotiations with France and Great Britain, and participated in the Constitutional Convention.

Franklin's political writings reflect his engagement with this wider world. He was not an abstract or systematic thinker. At no point did he articulate a developed conception of justice, or defend a theory of human nature. And yet *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*—now in its thirty-seventh volume, with nearly a decade of his life still to be covered—reveals a mind of extraordinary critical intelligence. By trade a printer, Franklin actively participated in the public sphere of news and communication. He wrote to influence opinions and shape events, to entertain friends and demolish enemies, to share ideas and attain commercial success. He addressed topics ranging from monetary policy to sexual mores, and from the conduct of business to the sins of slavery. He employed a wide array of literary

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forms, including journalistic essays, popular broadsides, public letters, political pamphlets, scientific treatises and bagatelles. Well schooled in the use of irony, satire and invective – he taught himself to write by miming Addison’s *Spectator* – he understood the value of a good hoax, and delighted in the construction of dramatic *personae*. Some of Franklin’s most famous productions were “authored” by fictional characters like Silence Dogood and Richard Saunders.

Faced with these riches, scholars have found it difficult to agree on Franklin’s contribution to the history of ideas. In scores of monographs he has been variously cast as Puritan, Deist and atheist; as Newtonian empiricist and Enlightenment rationalist; as democratic populist and liberal individualist; as petit bourgeois and proto-capitalist; as principled pragmatist and opportunistic scoundrel. American popular culture has had an easier time of it. Franklin is best known as prophet of the American dream: if you work hard and play by the rules, then you will succeed. Power and privilege are the fruit of industry and effort, not birth and ascriptive social roles. The American dream is closely associated with some of Poor Richard’s most famous phrases: “A penny saved is a penny earned,” “There are no gains without pains,” and “Early to bed and early to rise/Make a man healthy wealthy and wise.” Proof of these maxims is provided by Franklin’s own life, which affirms the power of individuals to shape their own destiny.

Franklin’s appeal has not been limited to adults. Children’s literature – with titles like *Ben and Me: A New and Astonishing Life of Benjamin Franklin as Written by His Good Mouse Amos* (in which Amos assumes responsibility for Franklin’s discoveries and inventions), *The Hatmaker’s Sign* (based on a parable Franklin told Jefferson when the latter balked at congressional attempts to edit the Declaration of Independence) and *Fart Proudly: The Writings of Benjamin Franklin You Never Read in School* (whose title derives from Franklin’s satiric proposal for the scientific study of flatulence, *Letter to the Royal Academy*) – testifies to the complex emotional appeal of Franklin’s life and writings. With the possible exception of George Washington, none of Franklin’s contemporaries has played as important a role in the moral and political imaginations of Americans; and Washington, distant as Cato, lacks Franklin’s immediacy and intimacy.

Ironically, Franklin’s importance to American culture has made it more difficult to understand him. Consider, for example, D. H. Lawrence’s well-known attack on Franklin’s moral and political ideals. In the *Autobiography* Franklin described his “bold and arduous project of arriving at moral

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perfection,” complete with a table of virtues and a method for rendering them habitual. Lawrence railed against the “barbed wire moral enclosure” that Franklin “rigged up”: “The soul of man is a vast forest, and all Benjamin intended was a neat back yard.” Why did Franklin do this? “Out of sheer cussedness.” Franklin “hated England, he hated Europe . . . he wanted to be an American,” and his whole life was dedicated to “destroying the European past.” Lawrence was a brilliant writer, but his argument rested on dubious interpretative protocols. Like many before and after, he reduced Franklin’s writings to the *Autobiography* and the *Almanack*; and like many before and after, he naively (or perhaps mischievously) assumed that the man born in Boston was identical to the characters he created.¹

Lawrence identified Franklin with the desire to be an “American,” and this, too, is a stumbling block. During most of Franklin’s life the term “American” referred to an inhabitant of a geographic region, whether Native American or British colonist. Only in the wake of the imperial crises of the 1760s and the revolutionary struggles of the 1770s did it begin to assume unique social, political, and cultural meanings. Franklin certainly played a role in the construction of the type “American” – not least when, as minister to France, he played to European visions of natural genius by wearing a beaver cap and simple wool coat. However, the identification of Franklin with America confuses four potentially distinct things: the biographical origins of the author, the social and political problems that dominated his thoughts, the audience he addressed, and the intellectual resources he brought to bear on them. Franklin spent his first two decades in Boston and the following three in Philadelphia. Throughout his life his attention was riveted on the dilemmas of civic life in North America. But during long missions to England (1757–62, 1764–75) and France (1776–85) he wrote at length and with great sophistication for European audiences. And there was nothing parochial about his reading habits. As a child, he eagerly read Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, Mather’s *Bonifacius*, and Defoe’s *Essay on Projects*; as a lad of 18, in a journal kept at sea, he debated Machiavellian dicta; as a budding political economist of 23, he exploited the arguments of William Petty and Marchamont Nedham. Other early papers indicate familiarity with the poetry of Thomson, Waller, Cowley, Swift, and Pope. At his death he left a library of 4,276 volumes in English, French, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and German.

¹ D. H. Lawrence, “Benjamin Franklin,” in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, 1923), 13–31.

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There is one final dimension to the problems posed by Franklin's "American" identity, this time having to do with historiographical conventions and commitments. Beginning in the 1960s, widely shared principles governing the study of political thought came under fire. Rejecting approaches that drew their bearings from canonical texts and teleological narratives, scholars sought to recover the meaning of texts by focusing on the linguistic contexts within which they were written. The significance of a claim or utterance could be grasped only in relationship to the range of idioms available at a given point in time. Shop-worn distinctions between philosophy and history, or between reason and rhetoric, were called into question. Complex works of literature were placed alongside analytic nonfiction. In England these arguments led to vital new interpretations of familiar figures like Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke, and to the recovery of less well-known writers like James Harrington. In the United States the new histories of political thought coincided with – and were largely absorbed by – the "republican" interpretation of the American Revolution. As late as 1955 Louis Hartz could argue that the key to American political thought was to be found in the writings of John Locke. But by the early 1960s scholars had discovered, in the pamphlet literature of the mid-eighteenth century, a language of virtue and corruption that appeared to be distinct from and in tension with the liberal logic of rights and interests. Within a few short years, the concept of republicanism dominated the landscape. Taking cues from the path-breaking work of Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J.G.A. Pocock, historians and political theorists recast the Revolution as a struggle to preserve republican liberty against the hazards of moral and political corruption.

Benjamin Franklin is a strikingly marginal figure in the pages of republican revisionists, and plays no greater role in the work of critics seeking to reassert a liberal paradigm. There is a simple reason for this: he was neither a "classical republican" nor a "Lockean liberal." Though concerned with virtue and corruption, he did not assume – as republican theory seemed to require – that a stable and successful polity rested on moral purity and selfless devotion to the commonwealth. Though dedicated to self-reliance and economic growth, he did not assume – as Lockean theory seemed to require – that property rights were natural, or that the language of natural jurisprudence fully captured the meaning of modern citizenship.

The present volume provides the textual foundation for a comprehensive reassessment of Franklin's political thought. Freed from the confines

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of the liberalism/republicanism debate, it uses the tools of historical research to open new questions and frame new arguments. At the center of this collection is Franklin's *Autobiography* [1],² the clearest statement of his lifelong commitment to personal and civic improvement. The language of improvement – of gain and profit, progress and perfection, increase and expansion, benefit and amelioration – runs throughout Franklin's writings. Its meaning was not simply – or even primarily – economic. In an influential essay on the emergence of “the peculiar modern Western form of capitalism,” Max Weber argued that Franklin exhibited, with “almost classic purity,” the ethos of rational acquisition. Franklin's ideal was the “credit-worthy honest man”; all of life was subordinated to the task of earning “more and more money” while scrupulously avoiding “all spontaneous enjoyment of life.” This duty to a calling, once sanctified by Puritanism, had lost its religious basis by Franklin's day. But, according to Weber, it continued to mobilize men around the rational pursuit of profit.³ There is much in Franklin to support this view, from *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (“Remember that Time is Money” [12]) to the wildly popular preface to the 1758 edition of *Poor Richard Improved* [22]. But the production of wealth was only part of the ethos Franklin sought to cultivate. He praised industry and frugality, but he also commended the pursuit of knowledge, the cultivation of friendship, and the satisfaction of need. “Improvement,” in Franklin's lexicon, was nothing less than shorthand for the civilizing process. It captured his deepest values and commitments, and tied him to some of the most important debates of the eighteenth century.

The *Autobiography* is a rich and complex work. Franklin intended to review his entire life, but the narrative we possess is incomplete and ends in his sixth decade. At the outset, he admitted to mixed motives: he wanted to provide a family history for his son, to vindicate his reputation from aspersions cast by his enemies, and to indulge his vanity by recounting his success in the world. But the *Autobiography* is also a deliberate work of moral and political education. Franklin thought his life “fit to be imitated.” As he explained to a friend, he hoped “to benefit the young reader, by showing him from my example, and my success in emerging from poverty, and acquiring some degree of wealth, power, and reputation,

² Numbers in brackets refer to documents listed in the table of contents.

³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1920, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, 2001), 47–78.

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the advantages of certain modes of conduct which I observed, and of avoiding the errors which were prejudicial to me.”⁴ Countless readers have debated the merits of Franklin’s example. Rushed into print immediately after Franklin’s death, the *Autobiography* has been published in over a dozen major and literally hundreds of minor editions. Translated into French, Dutch, and German in the 1790s, it has also been rendered in Spanish, Italian, Danish, Portuguese, Swedish, Hebrew, Russian, and Chinese. It is the most important work of its kind in American letters, and one of the most influential works of world literature.

Part Two of the *Autobiography* describes Franklin’s “bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection,” and provides the clearest statement of a moral theory in all his writings. But it is by far the briefest of the three major sections of the memoir. The biographical material surrounding it is equally important: it is intended to demonstrate the practical validity of Franklin’s insights and arguments. As a youth of 18 Franklin traveled to London. There, under the influence of dissolute friends and freethinking ideas, he committed a number of painful indiscretions. During the long voyage home he resolved upon a “Plan of Conduct” that he might “live in all respects like a rational creature” [2]. He settled on four goals: frugality, industry, honesty, and sincerity. To his chagrin he found the task exceedingly difficult. His challenge was not cognitive, but psychological. The content of virtue was easily distilled from the many and varied lists he encountered in his reading. (In the end, he settled on thirteen.) But the practice of virtue was an altogether different matter. Custom, habit, and inclination repeatedly triumphed over reason and conviction. Legislating moral reform – even self-legislating moral reform – was generally ineffective.

The intellectual foundation for this “discovery” lay in John Locke’s *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, which Franklin read with care. According to Locke, moral freedom rests on the capacity to “suspend the prosecution of this or that desire, as every one daily may Experiment in himself.” Each man has the capacity to “be determined in *willing* by his own Thought and Judgment”; but “’tis not easie for the Mind to put off those confused Notions and Prejudices it has imbibed from Custom, Inadvertency, and common Conversation.” Locke argued that the solution to this problem lay in a keen awareness of man’s utter dependence on God. Only the threat of punishment in the afterlife could lead men to resist

⁴ To Benjamin Vaughan, 4 October 1788, in Writings 9:675–6.

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the temptations of pleasure in the present.⁵ Here Franklin and Locke parted company. Locke was concerned with the stability and justification of moral claims, Franklin with the psychological bases of moral action. Though some might need religious reasons to be moral, not all did [23]. Virtue was a matter of habit, and what Franklin needed was an art or method for securing the virtues he possessed and acquiring the ones he lacked. To this end he devised a novel system of moral bookkeeping. In a small book he drew a table with a row for every virtue and a column for each day of the week. Each time he committed a fault, he made a black mark in the appropriate square. Each week he focused his attention on one of the virtues. Over time, through repetition, he hoped to experience the pleasure of “viewing a clean Book.” Franklin readily admitted that this did not happen. But he saw improvement, and attributed his long and happy life to the effects of his method. Later in life he commended this system and its correlates to friends who were faced with difficult decisions and errant passions [24, 35].

The rhetorical framework of the *Autobiography* would have been familiar to Franklin’s audience from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral and religious writings. A man of promise and ability leads a life of dissipation; awakening to this fact, he is disgusted with himself and resolves to change; through reflection and self-observation, he struggles to purge himself of vice; over time, with the helping hand of God, he moves ever closer to a life of purity and perfection. This narrative, concerned with the fate of a single soul, was deeply personal. But it was told for public purposes, and not simply that we might learn from the struggles and mistakes of others. The self created through self-discipline was an exemplary self. It represented the qualities and characteristics of a life infused with God’s grace, and it expressed God’s grace through benevolent action in the world. Good works were an outward manifestation of inner piety. As Cotton Mather put it in *An Essay upon the Good* – another work that Franklin read with care – “a workless faith is a worthless faith.”⁶

Franklin often expressed his moral ideals in precisely these terms: “What is Serving God? ’Tis doing good to man”.⁷ Yet he profoundly transformed their meaning. Franklin’s table of virtues included temperance,

⁵ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 2.21.47, 2.21.48, 2.13.27.

⁶ Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay upon the Good*, 1710, ed. David Levin (Cambridge, MA, 1966), 29.

⁷ Poor Richard, 1747, in *Papers* 3:105; see also [7].

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silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. He constructed no comparable table of vices, but we can infer them from his characterizations of men and events. The list would be short: argumentativeness (young Ben), idleness (James Ralph), indecision (Lord Loudon). These habits made men unhappy and prevented them from working in concert with others. They were known by their consequences, not by their coherence with divine revelation. “Vicious Actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the Nature of Man alone considered.”

Morality was a matter of actions and effects, not motives and intentions. In 1749 Poor Richard opined that “*Words* may shew a man’s Wit, but *Actions* his Meaning.” Seven years later he made the point with flourish:

At the Day of Judgment, we shall not be asked, what Proficiency we have made in Languages or Philosophy; but whether we have liv’d virtuously and piously, as Men endued with Reason, guided by the Dictates of Religion. In that Hour it will more avail us, that we have thrown a Handful of Flour or Chaff in Charity to a Nest of contemptible Pismires, than that we could muster all the Hosts of Heaven, and call every Star by its proper Name. For then the Constellations themselves shall disappear, the Sun and Moon shall give no more Light, and all the Frame of Nature shall vanish. But our good or bad Works shall remain for ever, recorded in the Archives of Eternity.⁸

We sometimes say that actions speak louder than words, particularly when we seek to expose the hypocrisy of others. Franklin had something different in mind: moral identity is established by, and known through, action. Properly speaking, it is not a matter of will, at least not as the will was understood by Puritan moralists. The self was a constellation of passions and interests, integrated into a productive whole through good habits. Purity of heart was not possible, nor was it necessary to moral improvement. Franklin’s contemporary, Jonathan Edwards, vehemently rejected this idea. According to Edwards, virtuous actions were the fruit of virtuous motives. A theory based on habit could not explain an original commitment to virtue (“How came he by that virtue from which he acted when he first began to reform?”⁹). Nor could it protect men against the sins

⁸ Papers 3:331, 7:89.

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, Miscellany 73, quoted in Norman S. Fiering, “Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue,” *American Quarterly* 30 (1978): 221.

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of hypocrisy and self-deception. But Franklin did not participate in the Puritan inner drama of guilt, self-doubt, and self-accusation. Nor did he linger, with fear and trembling, over backsliding and the recrudescence of sin. He tallied his mistakes – his “errata” – and sought to change himself by changing his habits. In this effort he did not insist that his motives be pure. As he quipped in the *Autobiography*, vanity and pride made him a better man.

Franklin cast his beliefs in latitudinarian terms. This rejection of doctrinal precision enabled him to address a difficult practical problem. Pennsylvania was the most heterodox colony in British North America. Founded in the late seventeenth century by William Penn, it was originally intended as a “holy experiment,” an asylum for Quakers and other persecuted people. In Franklin’s day Quakers were in the minority but dominated Philadelphia civic life and controlled the colonial Assembly. In the city they were joined by “new” and “old” Presbyterians; in the backcountry lived large numbers of Mennonites, Dunkers, and Moravians. The Penns, no longer Quaker, were the single largest landholders in Pennsylvania, and retained the powers and privileges of the Proprietors. Colonial prosperity and security required cooperation among these groups, but doctrinal differences and sectarian conflicts often precluded it. Franklin thought it possible to agree on actions without delving too deeply into their justification. Civic improvements – paving roads, providing hospitals for the poor, protecting against the menace of fire – were goals all could agree to. Cooperation emerged from the attempt to solve specific and local problems. Instrumental reasoning was a bond of union among men divided by custom, habit, and inclination.

On one occasion Franklin’s practical Christianity landed him in the lap of doctrinal controversy. In late 1734 the Rev. Mr. Samuel Hemphill, a Presbyterian clergyman ordained in Ireland, was invited to assist Jedediah Andrews, the ageing minister of Philadelphia. Franklin was a member of Andrews’ congregation, but did not attend his sermons because he found them “dry, uninteresting and unedifying, since not a single moral Principle was inculcated or enforc’d, their Aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good Citizens.” Hemphill’s sermons were altogether different. According to Franklin, they were not “dogmatical . . . but inculcated strongly the Practice of virtue or what in the religious Stile are called Good Works.” Here was a man after Franklin’s own heart. But in 1727 the Synod of Philadelphia, in an attempt to unite warring factions, had voted that all ministers subscribe to the Westminster Confession of

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Faith. Hemphill's sermons did not meet this requirement, and orthodox Presbyterians, led by Andrews, brought charges before the Synod in April 1735. Hemphill was "a *New-Light Man*, a *Deist*, one who preach'd nothing but *Morality*."

Franklin sprang to Hemphill's defense in four long and impassioned essays.¹⁰ He instructed his fellow congregants on the meaning of Christianity. The Sermon on the Mount was an "excellent moral Discourse." Jesus preached that "Morality or Virtue is the End, Faith only a Means to obtain that End: And if the End be obtained, it is no matter by what Means." Indeed, "a virtuous Heretick will be saved before a wicked Christian." Improvement came through a gradual transformation of habits, not an abrupt conversion or turning of the soul. Original sin was "absurd," a "Bugbear set up by Priests . . . to fright and scare an unthinking Populace out of its Senses." Brandishing anti-clerical weapons forged by English Dissenters a century before, Franklin went on the offensive. The judgment of man is fallible, and disagreement over doctrine is inevitable. Reformation is gradual, as partial truths displace partial errors. The free exchange of ideas is essential to this process. Every man must be permitted to speak and be heard. (Franklin used the same logic to defend the right and duty of printers to print unorthodox ideas [4].) In their persecuting zeal the Presbyterian clergy emulated "that hellish Tribunal the *Inquisition*." They must be humbled, and their repressive power destroyed, through the assertion of "natural rights and liberties" by "the brethren of the laity."

Franklin's defense failed and Hemphill was forced to leave Philadelphia. The loss was bitterly personal. Hemphill sought to incite lives of virtuous action, and Franklin had long embraced that goal. But in the course of defending Hemphill Franklin discovered just how unorthodox his ideas were. Even fellow supporters of Hemphill were troubled by Franklin's antinomian appeal to the laity. Within a few years he formed a fast friendship with the charismatic evangelist George Whitefield, and in so doing helped to bring the Great Awakening to Philadelphia. But Franklin repeatedly resisted Whitefield's invitation to live by faith and grace. A life dedicated to doing good was sanctified; from a religious point of view, that was sufficient. But what held together the habits of personal

¹⁰ In addition to *A Dialogue* (April 1735), reprinted here [6]; *Some Observations on the Proceedings against The Rev. Mr. Hemphill* (July 1735); *A Letter to a Friend in the Country* (September 1735); *A Defence Of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill's Observations* (October 1735), in Papers 2:37–125. All quotations in this paragraph are from these tracts.

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improvement? What social forms and political institutions were appropriate to civic improvement? And how were these goals held together?

From an early age Franklin had a “projecting public Spirit.” He saw enormous benefits in organized and enlightened collective action. As he put it in his proposal for a charity hospital, “The Good particular Men may do separately . . . is small, compared with what they may do collectively, or by a joint Endeavour and Interest.”¹¹ Franklin’s description of the first subscription library is paradigmatic. The members of Franklin’s Junto were avid readers, but as humble tradesmen they could not afford many books. Franklin suggested that they pool their resources in a “common Library.” They did so, but quickly discovered that their combined collection was much smaller than expected. Worse yet, over time the few books they had were mistreated and mislaid. After one year, the experiment was ended. It was in response to this crisis of the commons that Franklin “set on foot” his “first Project of a public Nature, that for a Subscription Library.” Fifty subscribers agreed to fund the library for fifty years; lists were drawn and books were ordered; hours were set, and subscribers were permitted to borrow books only if they promised to pay a fine for volumes unreturned. Franklin proudly reported that “the institution soon manifested its utility” and was imitated in other towns and provinces. “These Libraries have improv’d the general Conversation of the Americans, made the common Tradesmen and Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries.” And “perhaps,” Franklin added, they “have contributed in some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the Colonies in Defence of their Privileges.”

Franklin was equally successful in getting the streets of Philadelphia paved and swept. In wet weather unpaved streets became quagmires; in dry weather they were a dirty nuisance. Finding a “poor industrious man” who was willing to undertake the labor, Franklin “wrote and printed a Paper setting forth the Advantages” of hiring him at the rate of sixpence per house per month. The agreement was unanimously subscribed to, and “all the Inhabitants of the City were delighted with the Cleanliness of the Pavement that surrounded the market.” This “raised a general Desire to have all the Streets paved, and made the People more willing to submit to a Tax for that purpose.”

¹¹ “Appeal for the Hospital,” 8 August 1751, in Papers 4:150.

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Some may think these trifling Matters not worth minding or relating, but when they consider that tho' Dust blown into the Eyes of a single Person or into a single Shop on a windy Day, is but of small Importance, yet the great Number of the Instances in a populous City and its frequent Repetitions give it Weight and Consequence, perhaps they will not censure very severely those who bestow some Attention to Affairs of this seemingly low Nature. Human Felicity is produced not so much by great Pieces of good Fortune that seldom happen as by little Advantages that occur every Day.

Happiness, like character itself, was built slowly and piecemeal. It required self-discipline and the ability to identify with proper objects of desire and ambition [34].

Not all Franklin's projects were confined to the "little Advantages" of everyday life. In 1747 he led the formation of the Association, a private militia that enrolled 10,000 Pennsylvanians to defend the colony against French and Spanish privateers [10, 11]. As a middle colony removed from the coast, Pennsylvania had been relatively insulated from the imperial conflicts of the 1730s and 1740s. Then in the fall of 1747 rumors of an attack up the Delaware River began circulating. Colonists grew anxious, but the Assembly – dominated by Quakers – refused defensive preparations. Working with associates, Franklin campaigned to create a broad base of support for direct action. Though "the whole Province" was "one Body, united by living under the same Laws, and enjoying the same Privileges," Pennsylvanians were divided by regional, religious, and class loyalties. Some of these differences could not be easily transcended. The "religious Scruples" of the Quakers prevented them from taking defensive measures. Rich merchants, consumed by spite, refused to take a lead because in so doing they might help the Quakers. "Most unhappily circumstanced indeed are we, the middle People, the Tradesmen, Shopkeepers, and Farmers of this Province and City!" Franklin reminded his audience that "*Protection* is as truly due from the Government to the People, as *Obedience* from the People to the Government." If the Assembly was unwilling to defend Pennsylvania, then it ought not to object if the people took matters into their own hands. "All we want is Order, Discipline, and a few Cannon."

The Association was an extraordinary experiment. Soldiers – each of whom signed the *Form of Association* – were divided into companies whose social composition was intentionally mixed: "'Tis designed to mix the Great and Small together, for the sake of Union and Encouragement.

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Where danger and Duty are equal to All, there should be no Distinction from Circumstances, but All be on the Level.” (Fifty years later Franklin used the same argument to support proportional representation in the United States Congress [43] and oppose the representation of property in Pennsylvania’s upper house [44]. “The Combinations of Civil Society are not like those of a Set of Merchants.”) In their companies, soldiers directly elected their officers. Franklin hoped that this arrangement, when combined with rotation in office, would ensure the selection of good men and foster incentives to perform well.

Order and discipline required planning, but cannons were an altogether different matter. Soldiers were responsible for their own guns, but cannons were expensive and exceeded the capacity of most individuals. Franklin addressed this problem by selling tickets to a lottery. Pennsylvanians were familiar with the device: lotteries had been used in England since the days of Queen Elizabeth; and though opposed by Quakers on moral grounds, they were used throughout the eighteenth century to fund large-scale public and private ventures. Indeed, prior to the development of a stable bond market, lotteries were an essential mechanism for raising capital in colonial America. But Franklin’s use of a lottery is particularly striking because it called on the vice of cupidity channeled through a game of chance to fund the efforts of citizen-soldiers.

The Association was successful in all but one regard: it was an expression of “the people out of doors,” and as such – as an extra-legal and extra-political organization – it drew the ire of Pennsylvania’s Proprietors. Thomas Penn thought the Association little less than “a Military Common Wealth,” and worried that Franklin had become “a Sort of Tribune of the People.” He was “licentious.” He was a “leveller.” He was, in short, a “republican.”¹²

Franklin’s ability to think of civic needs in political-economic terms points to a final context for his thought. At precisely the moment when Franklin framed his “Plan of Conduct,” in precisely the place where he had committed his indiscretions and made his self-discoveries, men of letters were engaged in a heated debate over the relationship between moral philosophy and political economy. In *The Fable of the Bees* – printed in a third and revised edition in 1724, just as Franklin landed in London – Bernard Mandeville argued that society was an aggregation of self-interested individuals, bound together not by civic devotion or moral rectitude but by the

¹² Thomas Penn, quoted in Papers 3:186.

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tenuous bonds of envy, competition, and exploitation. During his first trip to London Franklin met Mandeville – whom he found a “most facetious, entertaining companion” – and participated in the intellectual life of clubs and coffee-houses. In these settings he encountered men steeped in the books and essays he had absorbed as a boy: Addison’s *Spectator*, Trenchard and Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters*, Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics*, Steele’s *Tatler*, Defoe’s *Essay on Projects*.

The controversy surrounding Mandeville’s *Fable* was part of a broad debate over the language of sociability and the logic of commercial society. All parties accepted that humans were capable of improvement, and that the weaknesses of individuals were to be overcome through combination with others. But what enabled humans to cooperate? What ties held them together in collective endeavors? It was here that the argument was joined. Christian moralists invoked love and the bonds of an inclusive church. Shared values and practices were the cement of social order. Machiavellians appealed to the power of necessity, imposed by the institutional constraints of a well-ordered polity. Sumptuary laws, military service, and a strong civil religion overcame the divisive effects of private interests. A third group, concerned with the emergence of commercial society, found these options politically implausible and morally unpalatable, and sought instead to explain the emergence of cooperative social relations through the power of needs and interests. Humans joined together because they were useful to each other. Through the reciprocal exchange of goods and services men acquired the skills needed to sustain and navigate the complex relations of a commercial society.

Franklin embraced the claim that the bonds of cooperation were forged on the anvil of utility. But his practical context was North America, not Great Britain, and the colonies of his youth lacked the institutional density of the mother country. There were few clubs and coffee-houses for enlightened conversation, no societies to foster natural philosophy. Commercial relations were unstable and unevenly distributed. Regional differences hindered common undertakings. Faced with these deficits, Franklin was forced to improvise. The debate over commercial society provided new tools for thinking about growth and change. Returning to North America in 1726, Franklin discovered that underdevelopment presented novel opportunities for enlightened action. As was so often the case, Franklin’s interventions in complex debates took the form of incidental tracts and practical proposals.

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Franklin's first political pamphlet concerned the monetary policy of Pennsylvania [3]. Seventeenth-century colonial economies were plagued by a shortage of circulating media of exchange. Gold and silver were extremely scarce: mercantilist policies led Parliament to prohibit the export of coin to the colonies in 1695, and English creditors generally required balance-of-trade payments to be made in the few coins that could be found. At times the colonies came close to operating on a barter basis. This was massively inefficient, and posed substantial obstacles to development. Beginning in 1690, colonial governments sought to resolve this liquidity crisis by issuing paper money in the form of bills of credit. Pennsylvania first did so in 1723, and the success of that venture led to a renewal in 1726. These experiments pleased many, especially merchants and debtors; but because the expansion of the money supply was accompanied by inflation, it dismayed landowners and creditors. *A Modest Enquiry* was Franklin's attempt to influence the outcome of this debate.

According to Franklin, "Commerce, or the Exchange of one Commodity or Manufacture for another, is highly convenient and beneficial to Mankind" because it eliminates the inefficiencies and instabilities of barter exchange. Money is simply a socially agreed-upon medium of exchange, and a plentiful money supply enables efficient market institutions to develop. In so doing it spurs immigration, which serves as a stimulus to continued growth. Scarce money, by contrast, frustrates commercial exchange and encourages recourse to barter. Prices increase, the value of commodities varies, labor is discouraged, and population is depressed. Many of these ideas were derived from William Petty's *Treatise of Taxes*. Franklin's contribution lay in his explicit attention to the political determinants of economic development. Property rights were conventional, not natural [38]. In colonial Pennsylvania there were classes of men who did not favor commercial development. "Men will always be powerfully influenced in their Opinions and Actions by what appears to be their particular Interest," and it was the interest of those who profited from inefficiency – the very wealthy, money lenders, and lawyers who built their business on failed contracts – to keep money scarce. These men and their interests were represented in the Assembly. The dynamics of electoral politics led to fluctuating monetary policies; this, in turn, exacerbated Pennsylvania's economic woes. The key to commercial growth was political integration.

The fluid and underdeveloped nature of colonial economies provides one context for understanding some of Poor Richard's maxims. The

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population of British North America was growing rapidly but was still highly dispersed. Commercial exchange primarily occurred in local settings where the stability of transactions rested on personal character, not impersonal market institutions. In the *Autobiography* Franklin observed that “in order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman” in Philadelphia, “I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* to the Contrary.” This was not a confession – Franklin was unembarrassed by his success at performing a role – but a statement of necessity. Commercial success rested on personal reputation, and reputation was a matter of appearance, of living up to the expectations of an audience. Doing so was not “natural”; it was hard work, and required extraordinary self-discipline [17, 42]. Franklin’s harsh criticisms of the English poor law stem from his belief that public assistance undermined the very qualities of character he thought essential to the development of a stable market [25]. In this context, Weber’s analysis is illuminating. Franklin called on colonists to subordinate their desires to an economic “calling.” Poor Richard’s ethos of industry and frugality was a strategic response to the challenges of an economically backward society.

During the late 1760s, industry and frugality were also weapons in the growing imperial conflict. As the British Empire was increasingly conceived in commercial terms, so restraint of trade was thought to be an effective bargaining tool. The non-importation agreements of the late 1760s were designed to influence British policy by creating a crisis among English merchants. In so doing they made the consumption patterns of ordinary Americans a matter of strategic concern.

Prosperity and economic development were important goals, but they were not Franklin’s only goals. Consider the Junto, the “club for mutual improvement” that Franklin and his Philadelphia friends – printers, scribes, shoemakers, and joiners – formed in 1727. Meeting on Friday evenings, members of the Junto provided mutual support, exchanged information and discussed moral, political, economic and scientific topics. Among the topics they handled were:

Whether Men ought to be denominated Good or ill Men from their Actions or their Inclinations?

If the Sovereign Power attempts to deprive a Subject of his Right, (or which is the same Thing, of what he thinks his Right) is it justifiable in him to resist if he is able?

Does the Importation of Servants increase or advance the Wealth of our Country?

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Whence comes the Dew that stands on the Outside of a Tankard
that has cold Water in it in the Summer Time?¹³

Franklin bragged that the Junto's debates were "conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after Truth, without Fondness for Dispute or Desire of Victory." This aspiration may not always have been achieved; to encourage good manners, small fines were imposed for uncivil conduct.

The Junto met for nearly forty years, and was, in Franklin's own opinion, "the best School of Philosophy, Morals, and Politics that then existed in the Province." It was also a hard-headed practical institution, combining moral uplift and self-help in roughly equal proportions. At each meeting members asked themselves questions like:

Hath any citizen in your knowledge failed in his business lately,
and what have you heard of the cause?

Have you lately heard any member's character attacked, and how
have you defended it? [5]

The education provided by the Junto was fine-tuned to the needs and interests of tradesmen confronting the complex and changing world of colonial British North America. Lacking patrons and disparaging masters, Franklin and his associates turned to each other for help. Improvement was a collective process, resting on the character of the participants and the quality of their interactions.

The Junto was the first of many educational institutions Franklin founded. In 1743, in order to address the imbalance of economic development and cultural opportunity in North America, he proposed what later became the American Philosophical Society [8]. "The first Drudgery of Settling new Colonies, which confines the Attention of People to mere Necessaries, is now pretty well over," wrote Franklin. "There are many in every Province in Circumstances that set them at Ease, and afford Leisure to cultivate the finer Arts, and improve the common Stock of Knowledge." But owing to "the extent of the Country such Persons are widely separated, and seldom can see and converse or be acquainted with each other, so that many useful Particulars remain uncommunicated, die with the Discoverers, and are lost to Mankind." The Society was to provide an institutional bond between individual scholars, holding regular meetings and distributing copies of communications. Its subject was anything and everything "new": "all new-discovered Plants," "New Methods of Curing

¹³ "Proposals and Queries to be Asked the Junto, 1732," in Papers 1:259–64.

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or Preventing Diseases,” “all philosophical Experiments that let Light into the Nature of Things, tend to increase the Power of Man over Matter, and multiply the Conveniences or Pleasures of Life.” As electrician and natural philosopher, of course, Franklin was one of the most important sources of new knowledge in the eighteenth century. But curiosity and flexibility were not restricted to science. In 1749 Franklin helped found the Philadelphia Academy (the future University of Pennsylvania) [13]. His hope, he explained two years later, was that youth might “come out of this School fitted for any Business, Calling or Profession.” But from the start he was engaged in a fevered battle over the curriculum. Some favored a classical education, but Franklin thought this anachronistic. “There is in mankind an unaccountable Prejudice in favour of ancient Customs and Habitudes, which inclines to a Continuance of them after the Circumstances, which formerly made them useful, cease to exist.” Such was the habit of teaching Greek and Latin, in preference to English; having outlived their utility, these languages – “the quackery of literature” – survived as little more than a mark of wealth and breeding.¹⁴

Finally, consider Franklin’s most influential work of social analysis, his 1751 *Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind* [14]. In this brief treatise he made two predictions that proved remarkably accurate: that the population of the United States would double every twenty-five years, and that the population of North America would outstrip that of Great Britain within a hundred years. The significance of these predications lay in a widely shared assumption of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century political economy, that the key to public prosperity and national independence lay in a growing population.

If populousness was the key to prosperity, then the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world suffered an embarrassment of riches. The combined population of the British Isles and mainland North America grew from roughly 8.4 million in 1700 to 13.3 million in 1770. This growth was unevenly distributed in space and time, and its impact was often devastating. In Scotland and Ireland land shortages drove thousands into poverty, and spurred waves of emigration in the decades prior to the Revolution. From Germany came many more, pushed by war and pulled by the promise of a better life. These changes were unexpected and only

¹⁴ “Idea of the English School,” 1749, in Papers 4:108; “Observations Relative to the Intentions of the Original Founders of the Academy at Philadelphia,” 1789, in Writings 10:29–31; “Excerpts from the Papers of Dr. Benjamin Rush,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 29 (1905): 27.

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dimly understood, and challenged the capacities of basic social and political institutions. Parliament, fearing depopulation and economic devastation – a labor shortage would drive up the price of wages, rendering British manufactures uncompetitive on the world market – sought to stop emigration from Britain and impose strict limits on American economic development.

Franklin skewered moral objections to population growth in one of his most famous hoaxes, *The Speech of Miss Polly Baker* [9]. In the *Observations* he turned to demography. The primary limit to population growth was the availability of free land. There was “no Bound to the prolific Nature of Plants or Animals, but what is made by their crowding and interfering with each others’ Means of Subsistence.” This meant that theories and policies devised for “full settled old Countries, as Europe,” were unsuited to “new Countries, as America.” It also meant that population varied with stages of economic development. When first discovered, America was fully settled – but by hunters, not husbandmen. The introduction of agriculture by Europeans created ecological space for a population explosion. Moreover, the distinct stages of development in England and America enabled them to cooperate rather than compete. Manufacturing relied on an oversupply of labor. The sheer size of the North American land mass ensured that it would remain agricultural for many generations; the abundance of uncultivated land made manufacturing unprofitable. And while land in North America provided refuge for many a poor Irish or Scotch farmer, it produced no net drain on the population of the British Isles. “What an Accession of Power to the *British* Empire by Sea as well as Land! What Increase of Trade and Navigation!”

Franklin’s analysis of the relationship between land and population gave him confidence that the continent would be occupied. But by whom? In “Rattle-Snakes for Felons” [16] he mocked the British practice of transporting criminals to the colonies. Slaves represented a much larger addition to the population of North America; but according to the *Observations*, slavery consumed, rather than produced, lives. Franklin’s sharpest comments were directed at German immigrants: “Why should the Palatine Boors be suffered to swarm into our Settlements . . . Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of *Aliens*, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them?” Pennsylvania Germans possessed a strong work ethic, but they refused to be culturally assimilated: they supported German printing houses, patronized German stores, and taught their children in German.

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Even more threatening, they outnumbered the English in many counties and carried all but a few elections. They possessed a potent combination of cultural distinctness and political clout [17]. Franklin was not alone in these worries; manuscript copies of the *Observations* were eagerly read by friends and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. Franklin embraced proposals to establish free English schools in German communities, and to require that all legal documents be written in English, and that all officeholders be competent to speak English. But he rejected draconian suggestions that German printing houses be suppressed: “Their fondness for their own Language and Manners is natural: it is not a Crime” [18].

The political divisiveness of Franklin’s language and political programs was evident to his contemporaries. When he published the *Observations* in 1760, he left out the sections treating German immigrants. Copies of the original manuscript survived, however, and were reprinted during the Assembly election of 1764 in an attempt to turn German voters against him. Franklin professed not to understand the fuss, but he felt the sting of electoral defeat nonetheless.

By 1754 Franklin had shifted his attention to the continent as a whole and to the unique threat posed by the French. Successful expansion of the British Empire required political cooperation; but intercolonial conflict was endemic, leaving the colonies vulnerable to French predation [15]. Franklin’s “Albany Plan” of 1754 sought to resolve this colonial security dilemma by creating a federal union in North America [20]. A General Council, explicitly modeled on the House of Commons, represented the people; a President General provided a link to the crown. The primary purpose of the union would have been to manage the western frontier of the Empire by regulating the Indian trade and supervising the formation of new colonies. Through frequent meetings, Franklin hoped that the colonists would learn to consider themselves “not as so many independent states, but as members of the same body.”

Franklin’s projects brought him into diplomatic contact with Native Americans. At times he cast Indians as primitive peoples, exhibiting noble simplicity; at other times he cast them as savages, mired in vice. To modern eyes these views are repugnant. But eighteenth-century prose was highly inflected – recall the sharp satire of Swift, or the bleak irony of Mandeville – and it is not always clear that Franklin’s rhetoric should be taken at face value. Hostile to bigotry, he also argued that Native Americans possessed their own cultures, distinct from those of Europeans, that could be understood with empathy and imagination [39]. He acknowledged that

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frontier violence was often the fruit of white provocation, and that brutality was not the monopoly of any one race or nation. He was appalled by the Paxton Boys – a band of backcountry Pennsylvanians who slaughtered defenseless Indians in late 1763 – and wrote an impassioned defense of their victims.¹⁵ Unlike many of his contemporaries – including Thomas Jefferson – he neither proposed nor embraced a policy of extermination. Franklin's faith in the benevolent effects of a commercial economy was so strong that he did not confront – or perhaps even contemplate – the human consequence of an expanding frontier population.

The Albany Plan was rejected by both the colonies and the crown. Franklin recapitulated many of his basic ideas twenty years later, in a draft “Articles of Confederation” [32]. But in the interim he continued to reflect on the relationship between demography and politics. In 1757 he was sent to London by the Pennsylvania Assembly to persuade the British to change the terms of the colonial charter. Franklin painfully misjudged the situation and failed in his mission. But, with the exception of a trip home in 1762–64, he remained in London until 1775 as official representative of up to four colonies. During this time he emerged as a leading spokesman for the American people. In this capacity he wrote well over a hundred pamphlets and letters to the press concerning the nature and basis of the British Empire.

By the second quarter of the eighteenth century the term “British Empire” had come to be identified with a distinct ideology: it was Protestant, maritime, commercial, and free. But the terms of integration between the mother country and the colonies of North America remained a bone of contention [26]. Were they partners and co-nationals, or were the colonies a politically dependent economic resource for the metropolis? Franklin saw this issue, first and foremost, in demographic and economic terms. He sought to reassure the Britons that the open expanse of land in North America guaranteed that it would remain agricultural for at least a century. He warmly embraced David Hume's 1760 essay “Of the Jealousy of Trade” in the optimistic faith that it might “abate” English anxieties about American development. But Franklin's enthusiasm masked a threatening possibility: that the wealth of North America was not subject to gross political manipulation. The British Empire rested on its domination of international markets. But markets have their own laws, imposing limits

¹⁵ *A Narrative of the Late Massacres, in Lancaster County, of a Number of Indians, Friends of this Province, by Persons Unknown*, 1764, in Papers 11:42–69.