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Learning from Franklin's Mistakes: Self-Interest Rightly Understood in the *Autobiography*

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> *You are young and have all the world before you; STOOP as you go through it, and you will miss many hard thumps.*
>
> —Cotton Mather's advice to the young Benjamin Franklin

Abstract: Benjamin Franklin divides the mistakes he lists in the *Autobiography* into "errata" and "great errata." He derived no benefit from the latter, but some benefit from the former. Examining Franklin's regret, or lack of regret, at these errata opens a window onto Franklin's understanding of morality. The laxity in his list of virtues and his flexibility with regard to conventional morals stem from the insight Franklin tells us he gained from these errata. For Franklin, or at least his persona in the *Autobiography,* there was no conflict between egoism and altruism, and he is therefore the embodiment of a type of self-interest well understood. Tracing the story of the errata, which Franklin inserted into an earlier draft of the work's first part, and Franklin's later actions provides the key to understanding the rhetorical strategy of the *Autobiography,* and the reason he never wrote his proposed *Art of Virtue*.

In the opening of the *Autobiography,* Benjamin Franklin tells his son that if he could live his life over again, he would ask only "the Advantages Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first."[1] He does not say he would correct *all* of these faults, though, but that he would happily repeat his life again, faults and all, if given the chance, thus implying that he may in fact have gained something from some, if not all, of his mistakes.[2] Throughout the first part of the work, Franklin points out several of the faults in this first edition of his life, which, in keeping with the printer's terminology, he calls errata.

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[1]Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Ormond Seavey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

[2]Franklin's statement here is also ambiguous regarding the issue of whether, on repeating his life, he would do so with the benefit of the wisdom he had gained on his first attempt.

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Commentators generally give little weight to these errata, and see them simply as youthful indiscretions committed before Franklin's moral and religious conversion.[3] Franklin, though, tells the story of these errata in order to show how he arrived at his central insight into morality and virtue and why he thought that a true understanding of these could not be contained in a list of dogmatic injunctions, but required a kind of reflective prudence that allowed one a degree of latitude in one's actions that could often appear to others as transgressions of conventional moral standards.

The key to understanding the story of the errata is paying attention to what Franklin says he gained or lost from each of the five he mentions, and his distinction between "great errata" and "errata" simply. With the former Franklin gained nothing and gave himself a great deal of trouble, while with the latter he in fact gained something, despite in one way or another contravening conventional morality.[4] He came to understand that the rules of virtue and the dictates of revelation are set out not because they are ordained by God, or in accord with some metaphysical order, but because they are good for us, and, although Franklin never says as much in so many words, when rightly understood, these do not require sacrifice, charity, or any kind of altruism, but may in fact require some transgression of traditional moral standards.[5] I will argue in this paper that this apparent moral flexibility and Franklin's unabashed self-interest were always simultaneously in the service of others, which Franklin came to see was the route to the most satisfying kind of happiness, and were informed by the lesson Franklin learned from the errata.

Scholars, and notably Aldridge, claim that Franklin's motivation in later life was primarily a sense of altruism and charity, and it is easy to read him this way, but Franklin never makes any such claims about his own

[3]See, for example, Lorraine Pangle, *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 65. Charles L. Sanford, "An American *Pilgrim's Progress*," *American Quarterly* 6 (1954), quoted in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: An Authoritative Text*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 311, sees the errata as analogous to Christian's sins in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

[4]By conventional morality, or traditional standards of morality, I mean loosely what would have been considered the moral norms of Franklin's time and place (many of which, of course, remain the moral standards of today). That is, one should be honest, not steal, commit adultery, pay one's debts, etc.

[5]Pangle, *Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*, 122, notes that "even when [Franklin's] appeal was to charity, he found a way of weaving prudent calculation into the mix." Edmund Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 17–25, 30, quoted in Jerry Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), xii, also notes that Franklin does not include charity in his list of virtues.

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actions.[6] In the *Autobiography* Franklin explains even his most public-spirited actions in terms of some benefit to himself, and primarily in terms of his own happiness.[7] For example, Franklin explains his motivation for starting a subscription library, one of his best-known benefactions, first in terms of a benefit to himself. "This Library afforded me the Means of Improvement by constant Study," Franklin says, since the booksellers in Philadelphia did not carry the kinds of books Franklin needed and it was inconvenient to order books from England (*Autobiography*, 81, 79). More importantly, Franklin was able to gratify his sense of vanity by claiming at first that the library was not his idea, and waiting until another claimed credit for it, and was then shown to be taking credit for Franklin's achievement: "If it remains a while uncertain to whom the Merit belongs, some one more vain then yourself will be encourag'd to claim it, and then envy will be dispos'd to do you Justice, by plucking those assum'd Feathers, & restoring them to their right Owner" (*Autobiography*, 81). Franklin was thus able to maintain a reputation for modesty through this device, while taking credit for the populace of the colonies being "better instructed & more intelligent than People of the same Rank generally are in other Countries" (*Autobiography*, 80). The Library Company was also incorporated in perpetuity by a charter a few years after its inception, and thus served as a lasting legacy (*Autobiography*, 80). Franklin similarly says about his scheme for matching funds contributions for a hospital, "I do not remember any of my political Maneuvres, the Success of which gave me at the time more Pleasure. Or that in after-thinking of it, I more easily excused my-self for having made some Use of Cunning" (*Autobiography*, 127).

This same pattern is apparent in Franklin's other acts of public utility, which frequently involve some manipulation of human nature. This manipulation and Franklin's self-interested motives were often the targets of famous detractors such as John Adams.[8] I will show, however, that although these critics

[6]Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967), 58, says of Franklin that "the system he evolved was fundamentally altruistic."

[7]See Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and the Education of America," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 2 (1992): 359, who describes what we could call Franklin's hierarchy of goods, from wealth to virtue to happiness: "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."

[8]John Adams, "John Adams on Franklin," *Boston Patriot*, 15 May 1811, quoted in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. Lemay and Zall, 244, speaks of the "the turpitude of [Franklin's] intrigues" and his ability to dissemble for the sake of different audiences. For a good discussion of this phenomenon see Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 9ff.: "In fact, the historic Franklin, the Franklin of the eighteenth century, seems to elude us as much as Gatsby's ever receding green light eluded him. When we actually recover the

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have seen through the upright façade Franklin presents of himself, they failed to grasp his true motives.[9] An important theoretical message of the *Autobiography*, then, stems from a careful examination of the errata and especially the difference between the great and non-great errata, or the consequences Franklin drew from this distinction.

These errata, I will argue, provide the key to understanding both the moral message of the *Autobiography* and the work's rhetorical strategy. We know from manuscript evidence and ink analysis that Franklin inserted all of the errata in one sitting at some point after writing the first part, in which they all appear.[10] This quintessentially Franklinian strategy suggests very strongly that the errata were inserted with a specific purpose in mind, and, I argue, that purpose is conveying a subtler and less conventional message than that which we find in the list of virtues he sets out in part 2. Franklin engages in this rhetorical strategy because he believes it will be a more effective means of conveying this message to those who can be so persuaded.

The most significant difference between the message he conveys in his list of virtues and that gleaned from the errata is that the former exhibits a tension between egoism and altruism that is absent from the latter. Franklin presented his teaching this way, I suggest, because he understood that the American character, informed both by deep Christian conviction and the drive toward acquisitiveness among other things, would likely always betray a serious uneasiness between the private and the public good.[11] It was this tension that Franklin hoped to channel in the *Autobiography*. He hoped to

Franklin of the eighteenth century, he does not seem to fit the image we have created of him." *Pace* Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2005), 18, who speaks of "the really unusual candidness of his autobiography."

[9]I do not attempt in this article to assess the veracity of Franklin's claims about himself or others. Instead, I focus on the message Franklin is trying to convey in the *Autobiography*, since this message is more important, and perhaps even truer, than the facts.

[10]P. M. Zall, "The Manuscript and Early Texts of Franklin's 'Autobiography,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1976): 378.

[11]Many thinkers have identified the tension between self-interest and selflessness as an important strand in the American character. In particular, many note the tension between the commercial and religious character of America. This is more fully articulated by authors such as Weber, who in *Protestant Ethic* points out the complex relationship between capitalism and Protestantism, and Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 500ff., who describes the paradoxical nature of self-interest well understood and the contrast between the seventh day of each week, when "the commercial and industrial life of the nation seems suspended" and "a deep repose, or rather a solemn meditation follows" as Americans contemplate their duties, and the other days of the week (517).

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educate Americans by instilling something like what came to be known as self-interest rightly understood. The deeper message of the errata, however, was that there is no tension between the enlightened self-interest of those like Franklin, who had a very sophisticated understanding of this, and the good of others (even if those others were not so enlightened). So Franklin hoped to teach most Americans to adhere as closely as possible to a standard whose full elaboration lies hidden in the text, and which could only be followed by those few who were as disciplined as Franklin.[12]

This article will begin with a discussion of two errata and two great errata, and will proceed to examine the most important and complex erratum, the *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*. I will then explain the rhetorical strategy behind the errata, and why Franklin set out his teaching in an autobiography rather than in his never-written *Art of Virtue*.

Bad Mistakes and Good Mistakes

Franklin mentions five errata in the first part of the *Autobiography*. Three of these he calls "errata" simply, and two, "great errata" (22, 44, 46, 35, and 44, respectively). The two great errata, from which Franklin gained nothing, and could potentially have lost a great deal, are, first, spending so much of the money his brother's friend Vernon had entrusted to him that he was not able to repay it for several years, and, second, not bothering to write to his fiancée Deborah while he was in England except to let her know that he was not coming back to Philadelphia any time soon. The three errata from which Franklin did gain something are, first, running away from his brother in Boston and going to Philadelphia, second, making advances on his friend's mistress, and, third, writing his *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*. This list of errata can be further subdivided into three groups. One pair of errors, one great and one not great, involve some kind of property: Vernon's money and Franklin himself as an indentured laborer. Another pair, also of one great and one simple error, involve Franklin's relations with women: the neglect of his fiancée and his attempted familiarity with his friend's mistress. In this section we will examine these two pairs in this order. The final and most important erratum for our purposes, the dissertation, is in a class of its own and so will be treated in the following section.

In what Franklin calls "one of the first great Errata of my Life," he enabled his impecunious friend Collins's constant drinking by dipping into the money Franklin's brother's friend Vernon had entrusted to him (*Autobiography*, 35). Despite repeated promises to repay what he owed to Franklin, Collins left for a job in Barbados and never contacted Franklin again. Franklin's inability to repay this debt weighed greatly upon him, and although he never specifies

[12]I elaborate on this in the next section, below.

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why this is so, we may suppose that if Vernon had recalled the debt sooner, not only would Franklin's reputation have been damaged, but he might also have found himself in debtor's prison. Franklin gained nothing from this error, and lived in constant fear of having this debt recalled (*Autobiography*, 34, 36, 55).

In another act of misappropriation which Franklin calls "one of the first Errata of my Life," but not one of the great errata, Franklin fled from his brother to whom he had indentured himself and went to live in Philadelphia (*Autobiography*, 21–22). The indentures binding Franklin to his brother had to be kept secret because they were part of a scheme whereby Franklin appeared to be the printer of his brother's newspaper, his brother having been forbidden from the position. Because of these circumstances, Franklin was confident that his brother would not pursue him on the basis of the secret indentures, and was able to flee with impunity. Unlike the debt he owed to Vernon, the "Unfairness" of this action "weigh'd little with" him because Franklin resented the way his brother had behaved towards him (*Autobiography*, 22).

Also, whereas Franklin gained nothing by spending money that belonged to Vernon, he gained a great deal by stealing himself, so to speak, from his brother and establishing himself in Philadelphia. One of the themes of the early part of the *Autobiography* is Franklin's need to be independent in order to succeed, and so we see him escaping the influence of bad friends such as Collins and Ralph, bad characters such as Keith and Keimer, and his indolent business partner Meredith. Franklin's escape from his brother is the first step on this road to independence, and it is fair to wonder whether he would have attained the heights he did if he had stayed on with his brother for several more years in Boston. He had made himself "a little obnoxious to the governing Party" there, and his "indiscrete Disputations about Religion began to make [him] pointed at with Horror by good People, as an Infidel or Atheist" (*Autobiography*, 22).[13] It is clear from the narrative that Franklin believed he needed a change of venue if he was going to pursue his already great ambition.

The second great error Franklin committed was to forget his engagement to Deborah Read, his future wife, and to write her only one letter, which said that he would not be returning to Philadelphia in the near future (*Autobiography*, 44). Franklin, looking back on this event, regarded this as a great erratum because he gained nothing by it, and risked a great deal. Rather than remaining faithful to his fiancée, Franklin allowed "that hard-to-be-goveren'd Passion of Youth" free rein, and constantly risked his health in the arms of "low Women" (*Autobiography*, 70). These "intrigues," as he calls them, were also expensive, and it was because of his expenses (not only with low women, but also at the theatre and in the pubs, etc.)

[13]See Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, 57–63.

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that he "was constantly kept unable to pay [his] Passage" (*Autobiography*, 70, 44). He also jeopardized his eventual marriage to Deborah, who married another while Franklin was in England.

The non-great erratum that parallels Franklin's neglect of Deborah is his attempting "Familiarities" with his unsavory friend Ralph's mistress, Mrs. T. (*Autobiography*, 46). This error, also motivated by the passions of youth, did not subject him to any danger, but in fact, he says, "I found my self reliev'd from a Burthen" (*Autobiography*, 46). Specifically, Franklin no longer had to read the long and poor sections of the epic poem Ralph was writing. He also lost any hope of being repaid what Ralph owed him, but this was irrelevant, since, as Franklin notes, "he was totally unable" (*Autobiography*, 46). In addition, he was also no longer obliged to lend anything more to Ralph, or to Mrs. T., as he had been doing (*Autobiography*, 46). In wronging Ralph and Mrs. T., Franklin clearly gained something, even if not by design, and lost little or nothing.

From the two libidinal errata, then, Franklin did not learn the lesson that one should never give in to one's sexual impulses, or that one should always remain faithful. It may turn out that most of the time it will be best to remain faithful and to avoid acting on such impulses, but these are not, from Franklin's account, absolute moral imperatives. What he learns is that there is usually nothing to be gained from such activity, and a lot to lose, but, given the right circumstances, attempting familiarities with a friend's girlfriend may prove a boon. Similarly, he does not learn from the two errors involving a breach of contract that one should never take what belongs to someone else. What he learns is that spending money that belongs to someone else without being able to repay it causes one a great deal of distress, but that breaking a contract in some circumstances may be a great benefit. Again, what he learns from these errors are not unbreakable rules by which the virtuous must always live, but the need for flexibility and reflection regarding one's actions.

As for whether it is wrong to harm others, Franklin demonstrates a certain ambivalence in these four errata. As we have seen, Franklin has no qualms about leaving his brother because he had been treated badly by him in the past. Similarly, he gives no indication that he was particularly sorry to have broken Ralph's trust, and the idea that he might have harmed Mrs. T. in some way with his advances does not seem to have entered his mind. Given these considerations, it is clear that Franklin regards these as errata because they are transgressions by conventional standards, but not because he has any feelings of guilt about them. Indeed, he never makes any attempt to redress the supposed wrong done to Ralph or Mrs. T., and, although he does say that he "made [his] Brother ample Amends for the Service [he] had depriv'd him of by leaving him so early," by taking care of his brother's son after he died, he does not say, as he does with his corrections of the two great errors, that he had corrected an erratum. Indeed, Franklin

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might not have been able to make such amends as he did unless he had committed the erratum against his brother and set himself up in Philadelphia.

The reader might suppose, because of his presentation of the two great errata, that Franklin at least felt guilty toward Vernon and Deborah. We might assume that he was in constant fear because of his debt to Vernon through a sense of obligation to repay one's debts, and that he supposed this an error because he had done Vernon a great harm. Also, when he tells us that he forgot his engagement to Deborah and wrote her only one letter, we expect him to say that this was an error because he had broken her trust and felt guilty about harming her so. Franklin no doubt wants to leave this thought in the reader's mind, since these would be the conventional reactions to such behavior. There is, however, no evidence in the text that he regards the great errata as errors because of a sense of guilt or obligation. We can only conjecture why he regarded these as errors, and what Franklin does tell us is that he feared the consequences that would redound to him from these actions, not that he felt aggrieved at having injured Vernon and Deborah. This is early evidence of a theme that will be developed below: Franklin does not do good to others unless there is also a benefit to him.

Before the end of part 1 of the *Autobiography* Franklin makes a point of telling the reader that he corrected the two great errata as best he could. When called on to repay Vernon, he begged for a little more time and eventually did pay back his debt with interest (*Autobiography*, 64–65). He also did marry Deborah Read, despite the uncertainty about whether her previous husband was alive or dead (*Autobiography*, 70–71). He thus avoided getting into trouble with the law for his debts, maintained his credit, and was able to marry a woman he had affection for, and who turned out to be a "good & faithful Helpmate," not to mention finding a remedy for the "violent natural Inclinations" of youth, for which, he says elsewhere, "Marriage is the proper Remedy" (*Autobiography*, 71; "Old Mistresses Apologue," 243). Just as he was able to take full advantage of the transgressions of the regular errata, he was able to avoid the dangers posed by the great errata.

Franklin's *Dissertation* and His Discovery of the Truth about Morality

The fifth erratum Franklin records, the writing of his *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, was so serious that the editor of the ten-volume collection of Franklin's writings would not include it.[14] "The work has no value," he claims, "and it would be an injury and an offence to the memory of Franklin to republish it," since, the editor notes, Franklin

[14]Franklin wrote the *Dissertation* as a response to William Wollaston's *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (London: James and John Knapton, 1731), for which he set the type in London.

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indeed does number it among his errata and in fact burned all but one copy of it.[15] The editor's decision appears imprudent given that the dissertation was, according to Franklin, an accurate synopsis of his thoughts on morality and deism at the time, and therefore, in some sense, an explanation of why he committed the errata.

The most immediate reason why writing the dissertation was an error is that it gave him a bad reputation, or at least threatened to; his boss Palmer thought more highly of Franklin after having read the dissertation, but thought the principles "abominable" (*Autobiography*, 44). In a letter to Vaughan in 1779, Franklin says that he came to dislike the dissertation "as conceiving it might have an ill tendency," and he burnt all but one copy (quotes in *Autobiography*, 301). This of course reminds the reader of the trouble Franklin had gotten into earlier in Boston with his Socratic disputations, which, as noted above, were giving him a bad reputation for atheism. There were Londoners at the time Franklin wrote his dissertation, though, who were not so easily shocked. As with the other non-great errata, Franklin gained something from writing the *Dissertation*. The work brought Franklin to the attention of intellectual circles in London and this occasioned his meeting Bernard Mandeville (*Autobiography*, 44–45).

These, though, are only the most proximate consequences Franklin experienced from writing the *Dissertation*. We know that Franklin carefully revised the *Autobiography*, and yet the discussion of the dissertation was left as a grammatical jumble that conflates its doctrine with his actions in such a way as to make it clear that Franklin regarded his deism as the motivating force behind his youthful errata.[16] In fact, the dissertation is best understood as the most visible symptom of the root cause of his errata: his early beliefs and the justification those beliefs provided him. The theory that Franklin expounds in the dissertation explains why he thought it would be acceptable to behave in ways that he knew were considered wrong by conventional standards. In the dissertation, Franklin claims that there is no real distinction between virtue and vice, and in his own life this predictably translated into an excuse to commit whatever immoral actions he was inclined to. In this way the relation between Franklin's deism and his errata follow the same paradigm as his failed attempt at vegetarianism.

After reading a work about the benefits of a vegetable diet, Franklin decided that eating meat was "a kind of unprovok'd Murder" (*Autobiography*, 36). Later, while on a ship where the sailors were frying freshly caught cod on the deck, Franklin "balanc'd some time between Principle & Inclination" and decided

[15]Benjamin Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. A. H. Smyth (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 2:vi. For those brave enough to read it, the dissertation can still be found in Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. L. W. Labaree (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1959), 57–71.

[16]See Zall, "The Manuscript and Early Texts of Franklin's 'Autobiography.'"

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that since big fish eat small fish, there was no good reason that he should not in turn eat them (*Autobiography* 36). "So convenient a thing it is," Franklin concludes, "to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do" (*Autobiography* 36). While Forde sees this as an example of Franklin's virtue of reasonableness, it is in fact an example, humorous because familiar to everyone, of inventing reasons for indulging inclinations one knows should not be indulged.[17]

The act of writing and making copies of the *Dissertation* for distribution was itself an indulgence of Franklin's vanity; vanity at his superior intellect, and ability to challenge the dominant moral framework of his time (he was first convinced of the truth of deism by reading works that were attempting to refute it: *Autobiography*, 58).

Each of the four errata Franklin mentions in the previous section was similarly an indulgence and a transgression against convention that he justified by the deistic principles he would set out in the dissertation. Franklin tells us that he "became a thorough Deist" when he was fifteen (*Autobiography*, 58). The first erratum, running away from his brother, occurred when Franklin was seventeen. Though he was legally bound to remain with his brother, and knew that he should have felt morally obliged to do so as well, he had no compunction about leaving and as we have seen, he did not feel any guilt about acting on his impulse to be free of these constraints. His intrigues with low women and Mrs. T. and his forgetting of Deborah were clearly indulgences of passion which Franklin would have known were not in accord with the "religious Impressions" he had learned from his parents (*Autobiography*, 58). It is not entirely clear why Franklin was willing to lend so much of Vernon's money to Collins, but whether it was simply to be an amiable fellow, or a simple lack of judgment or prudence, Franklin would also have known that spending another's money was wrong.

Despite the errors Franklin committed while an adherent of deism, the experience of committing them, and writing the dissertation, were necessary steps on the path to understanding the truth about morality. In this sense, writing the dissertation is the most important erratum since it caused the greatest harm, or potential harm, but also led to the greatest benefit. In the midst of discussing the trouble his deism gave him, he says,

> I began to suspect that this Doctrine tho' it might be true, was not very useful. My London Pamphlet, which had for its Motto those Lines of

[17]Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and the Education of America," 360, although I agree when he speaks of "the moderating role of reason in moral deliberation that is central to the outlook of the *Autobiography*." Cf. J. A. Leo Lemay, "Franklin's *Autobiography* and the American Dream," in *The Renaissance Man in the Eighteenth Century* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1978), quoted in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. Lemay and Zall, 349, who sees this episode as an example of Franklin's "profound skepticism concerning reason."

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> Dryden … and from the Attributes of God, his infinite Wisdom, Goodness & Power concluded that nothing could possibly be wrong with the World, & that Vice & Virtue were empty Distinctions, no such things existing: appear'd now not so clever a Performance as I once thought it. (*Autobiography*, 58–59)

More specifically, Franklin observed that his friends Ralph and Collins both did him wrong, "without the least Compunction," after he had "perverted" them to deism, and that he himself had wronged Vernon and Deborah Read (*Autobiography*, 58). It is quite possible from the narration that Ralph's abandoning his wife and child when he went with Franklin to London was less burdensome to him because of his deism (*Autobiography*, 41). Franklin also suspects that Keith's mistreatment of him had something to do with the governor's freethinking ways (*Autobiography*, 58). Just as Franklin could do as he pleased regardless of the consequences to others while under the spell of deism, so those he had converted to the doctrine had no qualms about acting on their own impulses even when that meant doing wrong to Franklin.

As with the other errata, Franklin's main regret was not that he harmed others, but the consequences that bore directly on him. The friends he had "perverted," he says, "wrong'd *me* greatly," and his harming Vernon and Deborah was not in itself a problem, but, he says, this harm "at times gave *me* great Trouble" (*Autobiography*, 58; my italics). Both espousing this doctrine to others and acting according to its principles were only causing Franklin grief. So, when Franklin tells us of his discovery that deism, "tho' it might be true, was not very useful," and of his discovery of morality, we should not be surprised that this reformation is not a conversion from selfishness to altruism, but a move to a more complete and efficient understanding of self-interest (*Autobiography*, 59).

When Franklin speculates that the doctrine of his dissertation might be true, but not useful, he means that there was likely no metaphysical grounding for conventional notions of virtue and vice, or right and wrong, but this did not mean one could live as if these notions did not exist with impunity. Franklin discovered that despite his supposed proofs that nothing could be wrong with the world, he could understand readily enough when he had been wronged by others, and he could also tell that being wronged did not make him happy. This was Franklin's discovery of the true ground of morality, that "certain Actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by [revelation], or good *because* it commanded them; yet probably those Actions might be 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" (*Autobiography*, 59). Franklin thus became "convinc'd that *Truth, Sincerity & Integrity* in Dealings between Man & Man, were of the utmost Importance to the Felicity of Life"

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(*Autobiography*, 59).[18] This discovery was the most important thing Franklin gained from his deistic beliefs, and writing the dissertation was a necessary step on the road to that discovery.

It is for this reason that Franklin claims that there was "something of *Necessity*" in the errors of his youth. He uses the term "necessity" in the same loose sense in which he describes the error that had crept into his metaphysical reasoning. When Franklin claims that the immoral and unjust actions he had committed were not entirely willful, "because the Instances I mentioned, had something of *Necessity* in them, from my Youth Inexperience, & the Knavery of others," this claim may at first appear as a tongue-in-cheek attempt to exculpate himself from any wrongdoing, and thus as evidence that Franklin had not in fact learned very much about right and wrong (*Autobiography*, 59). In fact, though, by speaking of necessity in this context, Franklin makes it clear that he remains uninterested in assigning moral blame, and is not about to feel guilty for what he has done. His understanding of right and wrong, "in their own Natures," goes hand in hand with his deepening understanding of human nature and the path to happiness, and has nothing to do with moral dessert (*Autobiography*, 59). Without his doubts about religion, and his attempt to give a coherent account of the nature of virtue and vice, liberty and necessity, pleasure and pain, Franklin would not have gained what became this central insight about morality. It was because of this gain that Franklin numbers the *Dissertation* among his errata, but not among the great errata.

What Franklin learned was not a set of rules of morality, however, but the reasons behind conventional virtue. With this understanding of the foundations of morality he was able to act according to these precepts with a flexibility which sometimes made him appear something of a scoundrel to those who were perceptive enough to see through Franklin's upright façade, but not astute enough to perceive his more complex understanding of morality.[19]

[18]Many scholars see in this development a new focus on pragmatism. See, for example, James Campbell, "The Pragmatist in Franklin," in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Carla Mulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106.

[19]Weinberger (*Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, 159, 174, 55) claims that Franklin's *Dissertation* was a "slapstick parody of Deism" and one of a number of "metaphysical burlesques," and that the moral conversion Franklin describes "*never happened at all*." This is because, Weinberger argues, "Franklin concluded that our commonsensical concepts of morality—justice, free will, deserving (merit and demerit), devotion, virtue and vice, the noble, evil, and reward and punishment—make no internal logical sense, despite the fact that they seem so obvious" (203). I am in partial disagreement with these points. I do not think that the *Dissertation* was a burlesque, although I agree that the account Franklin offers is not as straightforward as it at first appears. Also, it may be true that Franklin did not take many of the terms listed above seriously, but he clearly did undergo a moral reformation of some sort. Kerry Walters,

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Teaching Men as If You Taught Them Not: The Rhetorical Strategy of the *Autobiography*

In this section I will explain why Franklin's list of virtues is not what he meant for all of his readers to imitate dogmatically, and why he did not write the *Art of Virtue* or pursue some of his other projects. I will also explain how Franklin applies the lessons he learned from his errata in the anecdotes he recounts in the later sections of the work.

Franklin opens the *Autobiography* by telling his son that he wrote it so that his posterity could learn the means he made use of to go through life "with a considerable Share of Felicity" and imitate these means (*Autobiography,* 3).[20] What these means are, though, he does not make entirely clear. He does set out a set of rules, or virtues, in the second part of the *Autobiography,* and many, if not most, have taken this as a list of the general principles he meant for his readers to imitate. This list, though, as I will argue in this section, is not the whole story. Franklin thought that a majority of readers, and especially young readers, could benefit only from the story of moral and religious redemption he tells and from the list of specific virtues he sets out. This is in keeping with his reluctance to challenge the religious beliefs of those he does not think capable of living well without them. In the *Autobiography* he tells of a man he met who "undertook … to travesty the Bible in doggrel Verse as Cotton had done to Virgil. By this means he set many of the Facts in a very ridiculous Light & might have hurt weak minds if his Work had been published" (*Autobiography,* 24).[21] He also thought, though, that a sizable minority, which would only increase with

Revolutionary Deists (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011), 60–61, wonders how seriously Franklin wanted readers to take the *Dissertation*, but concludes that "there is more reason to think that Franklin was deadly earnest in his defense of the bleak cosmic machine portrayed in the *Dissertation*," and that "in his references to it in later life, he never gives any indication that his purpose in writing it was anything more than to push the Newtonian worldview to its logical conclusions."

[20]Notice here that Franklin refers to the intended beneficiaries of the work in the plural, indicating that it was never meant solely for his son, as some have argued. *Pace* Wood (*Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 139) who claims that "it is more likely that Franklin actually did intend the first part of his memoir for his son, perhaps partly as an admonishment to William to cut his expenses and do as his father had done."

[21]Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God*, 127–28, also recounts a letter from Franklin to a deist acquaintance in which Franklin says, "You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous Life without the Assistance afforded by Religion. … But think how great a Proportion of Mankind consists of weak and ignorant Men and Women, and of inexperienc'd, and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the Motives of Religion to restrain them from Vice."

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the growing influence of the Enlightenment, would find it more and more difficult to believe not only in divinely revealed rules for living, but in any kind of dogmatism.[22]

One of the main audiences for the *Autobiography*, though, is the youth of America. Franklin initially intended the work as a model for his posterity to imitate, and the letters of both Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan emphasize the potential value of the work as a means of influencing the minds and character of young people (*Autobiography*, 73–75). The placement of these letters at the head of the second part of the work is significant in this respect. The focus of this short second part is Franklin's list of virtues, and this list provides the clearest set of lessons the young person would be able to grasp.[23]

He also, of course, meant for the actions he recounts to be imitated. Franklin, though, included only those details about his life and his actions he thought would be beneficial to his readers, and this includes both the stories of his errata, and his less than upright behavior, as he seems to suggests in a letter to Benjamin Vaughan: "To shorten the work, *as well as for other reasons*, I omit all facts and transactions, that may not have a tendency 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, the advantages of certain modes of conduct which I observed, and of avoiding the errors *which were prejudicial to me*."[24] This last clause leaves open the possibility that Franklin committed errors which were not prejudicial to him, and that Franklin wanted at least some of his readers to benefit from that lesson as well.[25] As noted above, all of the

[22]As Franklin (*Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, 224) says in a letter to Lord Kames about his proposed *Art of Virtue*, "all Men cannot have Faith in Christ; and many have it in so weak a Degree, that it does not produce the effect [of making men virtuous]. Our *Art of Virtue* may therefore be of great Service to those who have not Faith." See also Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, 40, who is correct to note that "it is not unreasonable, I think, to see the *Autobiography* as a Franklinian warning about a danger of the dawning modern age: the possible death of God."

[23]Mark Twain, "The Late Benjamin Franklin," in *The Galaxy* 10 (July 1870): 138–40, quoted in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. Lemay and Zall, 272, recounts how both Franklin's actions and his aphorisms were used to inspire young boys to good behavior. Franklin, he says, "was of a vicious disposition, and early prostituted his talents to the invention of maxims and aphorisms calculated to inflict suffering upon the rising generation of all subsequent ages. His simplest acts, also, were contrived with a view to their being held up for the emulation of boys forever—boys who might otherwise have been happy."

[24]Franklin, letter to B. Vaughan, October 24, 1788, in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. Lemay and Zall, 206; my italics.

[25]There is a similar potential ambiguity in a letter to the Duke de La Rochefoucauld (in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, 205), in which Franklin states that "what is done [viz., the *Autobiography* down to his fiftieth year] will be of more general Use to young

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errata were inserted into part 1 after the first draft was complete, and Franklin must have intended for thoughtful young people and more observant readers to draw the appropriate lessons from these upon deeper reflection.

It is for this type of reader that Franklin sets out the more complex story of the errata, his discovery of the foundation of morality, and his flexible use of conventional virtue in the service of his own happiness.[26] Uncovering this story requires more interpretive work on the reader's part, and a comparison between the story of the errata and the more obvious story of Franklin's moral redemption and what he says about his list of virtues.

Franklin is not explicit about the lesson of the errata because of his fear that proclaiming self-interest to be the real motive of virtuous action would lead most individuals to use this as an excuse to act without reflection on whatever inclinations happened to move them, as Franklin had when committing his errata under the spell of deism. Few would be able to learn the lesson Franklin did from these errata, and really understand when moral transgression would contribute to one's true happiness and when it would lead only to an apparent benefit that would in fact do more harm than good. Franklin offers his list of virtues, lax as it is, in part because he thought that many would not be able to fully understand this insight or to act on it, and would therefore continue to think about virtuous action in terms of sacrifice and altruism and adherence to a set of injunctions.

Roughly three years after writing the *Dissertation*, Franklin tells us, he "conceiv'd the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection," and sets out a list of thirteen virtues he plans to adhere to (*Autobiography,* 84). As mentioned, many have taken this list of virtues very seriously. Other scholars have noted the looseness of many of these rules, as well as the humor in them.[27] To

Readers; as exemplifying strongly the Effect of prudent *and imprudent* Conduct in the Commencement of a Life of Business" (my italics).

[26]Implicit in this argument is the notion that Franklin had a plan in mind for the design of the *Autobiography,* which he was able to follow through despite the difficulties he faces in writing the different parts of the work. I therefore agree with Hugh J. Dawson, "Franklin's 'Memoirs' in 1784: The Design of the 'Autobiography,' Parts I and II," *Early American Literature* 12, no. 3 (Winter 1977/1978): 287–91, who argues that the moralism of part 2 depends on the narrative of part 1, but disagrees that there was a fundamental change of design between the two parts. I also disagree with Aldridge, "Form and Substance in Franklin's Autobiography," in *Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell*, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967), 48, who claims that the plan of the *Autobiography* was a "virtual disaster."

[27]Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*; Ralph Lerner, *Playing the Fool: Subversive Laugher in Troubled Times* (Chciago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 89–108; Ralph Lerner "Franklin, Spectator," in *The Thinking Revolutionary* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Paul E. Kelly "Franklin's Satiric Vein," in *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*. There remain those too who see this list of virtues as emblematic of Franklin's

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cite the most obvious examples of this laxity and humor, Franklin defines temperance not as a prohibition against alcohol and gluttony, but as "Eat not to Dulness, Drink not to Elevation," sincerity not as never telling a lie, but as "Use no hurtful Deceit," and chastity not as being chaste, but as an injunction to "Rarely use Venery but for Health or Offspring; Never to Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another's Peace or Reputation" (*Autobiography*, 84–85). This definition of chastity was in fact so shocking that many editions of the *Autobiography* did not include it.[28] Not only does Franklin avoid absolute prohibitions for the most part in these virtues, he also leaves far more room for personal interpretation than one finds in, for example, the Ten Commandments.

Despite the leeway he gives himself in these rules, Franklin found it very difficult not to transgress them. He made so little progress that he was "almost ready" to give up. As in the case of his abandonment of vegetarianism in the face of fresh fried cod, "something that pretended to be Reason" sometimes urged him to give up his plan for moral perfection because attaining that goal would probably make him "envied and hated" (*Autobiography*, 92). Despite these challenges, he kept working toward this goal throughout his life, but found that it was too much to expect perfect mastery of even this loose set of moral virtues. Franklin did not, however, subject himself to harsh punishment for his transgressions, nor did he see any value in feeling guilty about them.[29] The penalty for his failures to keep to these virtues was not flagellation, repentance, or wearing a hair shirt, but wiping them off his book with a "wet Sponge" (*Autobiography*, 91).

To this imperfect attempt to master this list of virtues Franklin attributes "the constant Felicity of his Life" until the year he wrote this part of the *Autobiography*, and his expected continued happiness for the years that were left to him (*Autobiography*, 92).

Franklin then tells us that he had planned to publish his list of virtues along with comments which would have shown the advantages of possessing each virtue and the consequences of not having it, along with the "*Means & Manner* of obtaining Virtue" (*Autobiography*, 93). This would have been Franklin's *Art of Virtue*. This book was never written, however, because he claims to have been too busy to write it.[30] This is not an entirely persuasive claim since

piety. I do not share this position. See, for example, William Pencak, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Cotton Mather, and a Puritan God," *Pennsylvania History* 53, no. 1 (1986): 1–25.

[28]Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God*, 11.

[29]Franklin very rarely admits to any feelings of guilt. One significant exception is his deep regret at not inoculating his son from smallpox, from which his son later died. This, however, is not a matter of moral guilt, but more of a regret at a scientific error, or an error in judgment.

[30]For a discussion of this excuse see Douglas Anderson, "The Art of Virtue," in *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, 31–32.

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Franklin was quite prolific and found time to write many pieces that are less important than the *Art of Virtue* arguably would have been had it been completed.[31]

The main teaching of the *Art of Virtue* would have been 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 ones Interest to be virtuous, who wish'd to be happy even in this World" (*Autobiography*, 94). This maxim, though, as we have seen, was the most important lesson Franklin learned from his errata. This epiphany is brought home to the reader through the narration of the *Autobiography* in a way that it never could have been in a list of virtues and corresponding instructions. For this reason, and others which I will discuss below, I submit that Franklin's *Autobiography* in fact fulfills the same goal as the *Art of Virtue*. Franklin tells us that the *Art of Virtue* was connected to a plan "that required the whole Man to execute, and which an unforeseen Succession of Employs prevented [his] attending to" (*Autobiography*, 93–94). In other words, the book and the plan would have required that its author devote his life to it, but Franklin's own life got in the way. Similarly, Franklin says that he was planning to publish his list of virtues in this work, and in fact this list is published, as he knew it would be, in his *Autobiography*.

When Franklin tells us that he appeared to be humble without being so, and that he decided to avoid dogmatic statements and to try a less overbearing method of persuasion, he is in fact revealing his rhetorical strategy in the *Autobiography*, and the real reason he wrote it rather than the *Art of Virtue*. By repeatedly harking back to his unfinished project, Franklin prompts the reader to think about the relation between it and the *Autobiography*. The latter is not dogmatic, as the former might have been, and in this way Franklin was able to put into practice the lesson he had learned from Pope,

[31]Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, xv, claims that Franklin "did not believe that the deepest and most important questions could be answered by abstract philosophical systems of the kind that became schools of thought," and "that is why Franklin wrote no comprehensive formal treatise." I agree that Franklin did not think he could teach the deepest lessons he learned through a systematic treatise, but I do think, as I argue below, that he thought he could impart at least part of his wisdom to some readers through the experience he shares in the *Autobiography*. I am in closer agreement with Weinberger's statement that "there is something much better [than a didactical philosophical teaching in Franklins works]: the questions, lines of thought, and conclusions to which we are prodded by Franklin's artful provocations" (5). Pangle, *Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*, 4, also notes that "Franklin knew … the great public utility of his own vanity: he knew that in telling stories he was at his most charming and persuasive, and at some level he realized that his vision of happiness and of democratic citizenship could be advanced in no better way than by telling his own story."

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that "*Men should be taught as if you taught them not*" (*Autobiography,* 19). In fact, Franklin had a model on which to base this narrative mode of teaching in one of his early favorites: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (*Autobiography,* 13).[32] Franklin found a copy of this book on the person of a drunken Dutchman who had fallen overboard during the journey to Philadelphia (*Autobiography,* 23). It is here that Franklin notes both the genius of Bunyan's writing and the tremendous popularity of the work. Franklin must have noticed, though, as the reader does, that it was not doing the Dutchman much good. Franklin, in writing of his own progress through the world may well have sought to replace Bunyan's work with an updated version for Americans with his own *Autobiography.* Again, Franklin may have seen this as a more efficacious method of disseminating his teaching, and one that would flatter his vanity.

It is no coincidence that Franklin waits until after discussing his purportedly failed plan to write the *Art of Virtue* to mention the addition of a thirteenth virtue to his original list of twelve. This extra virtue, humility, was suggested by a Quaker friend of Franklin's who told him that he was often "overbearing & rather insolent," and too eager to point out the errors of others (*Autobiography,* 94). Seeing that his friend was correct, Franklin determined to change his approach, and, he says, "perhaps for these Fifty Years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical Expression escape me" (*Autobiography,* 95). This is not to say that Franklin became less sure of himself. He was still determined to prove to others that he was right and to win them to his side, since he was, as he admits, an incorrigibly proud man, but he adopted a more subtle strategy: "I cannot boast of much Success in acquiring the *Reality* of this Virtue; but I had a good deal with regard to the *Appearance* of it" (*Autobiography,* 94). Even Franklin's occasional admissions that he could not conquer his vanity and pride are part of this appearance of humility. When he tells us that if he did overcome his pride he would be proud of his humility (indeed, marking a box in the space provided for humility in his book would have disqualified him from doing so), he is revealing an all-too-human weakness that most can identify with. These admissions are thus part of Franklin's charm, and also an ingenious way of raising our esteem for him, and further flattering his vanity.

The specific definition Franklin provides for the virtue of humility is, "Imitate Jesus and Socrates" (*Autobiography,* 86). There may be something tongue in cheek about the attempt to imitate two such figures, but the imitation of Christ had been a valid goal of many Christians for centuries. The most obvious way of understanding this injunction is that Jesus and Socrates were paragons of humility. There is, however, another sense in which Franklin

[32]For Franklin's use of Bunyan as a model, see Sanford, "An American *Pilgrim's Progress*," 310.

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imitates Jesus and Socrates in the *Autobiography* and evinces more of the appearance than the reality of humility.

Franklin was a keen observer of Reverend Whitefield, a controversial preacher who spent time in Philadelphia. He was fascinated by Whitefield's ability to persuade his hearers, even against their better judgment, as Franklin found out for himself, and his ability to be heard by so many. Franklin paid careful attention to his sermons, came to be able to distinguish new from old material, and made an experiment of tracing the boundaries of the extent to which his voice would carry when preaching (*Autobiography*, 111). Franklin also observed, though, that Whitefield's "Writing and Printing from time to time gave great Advantage to his Enemies," since whatever he happened to say during a sermon might be overlooked or forgotten, but his writings endured, and provided ample material to criticize. According to Franklin, "if he had never written any thing he would have left behind him a much more numerous and important Sect. And his Reputation might in that case have still been growing, even after his Death … his Proselites would be left at Liberty to feign for him as great a Variety of Excellencies, as their enthusiastic Admiration might wish him to have possessed" (*Autobiography*, 112).

Shortly after relating this observation, Franklin discusses an important difference between the Quakers and the Dunkers that he must have wanted the reader to connect with what he had said about Whitefield. The Quakers, who were pacifists, were forced into various expedients in order to support the military campaigns of Pennsylvania, while the Dunkers could be more flexible because they had decided not to set down their articles of belief in writing, believing that "we are not sure that we are arriv'd at the End of this Progression, and at the Perfection of Spiritual or Theological Knowledge" (*Autobiography*, 119).

By writing the *Autobiography* rather than the *Art of Virtue*, Franklin was able to present his list of virtues as a goal he had a hard time achieving, rather than as a dogmatic exhortation to others, and he was able to teach the more complicated lessons he learned from his errata, including the need for moral flexibility, that appears beneath the surface of the *Autobiography*. By putting on the masks that nearly all readers recognize, and which make it difficult to know who exactly Franklin is and what he is trying to teach, he was able to avoid presenting his thoughts in such a way that he could be attacked as Whitefield was. And the mention of the advantages Whitefield might have enjoyed by refraining to set out his beliefs in writings, brings to mind the two historical figures who are famous for having had a major impact on the world without writing anything down: Jesus and Socrates. Franklin, in concealing his true thoughts and his most important teaching, came as close as one could in the age of the printing press to avoiding the dangers of writing too frankly, and allowing a mythical status to grow around him after death.

Franklin was thus able to learn from Whitefield, and to beat him at his own game. Franklin too had contemplated forming his own sect, the "Society of

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the *Free and Easy*," but as in the case of the *Art of Virtue*, he claims that he was too busy with his affairs to pursue this project. In fact, he was able to have a larger impact on Americans through his *Autobiography* than he would have had with this sect, and a key part of this success was his ability to appear humble and avoid any dogmatism while attempting to instill his teaching.

We can now state more clearly what in particular Franklin learned from his errata, and how he applied this insight throughout his life by examining another lesson Franklin gleaned from his observation of Whitefield. Franklin relates that he attended a sermon by Whitefield, whose purpose was to raise money for an orphanage in Georgia, a project Franklin disapproved of. Despite his resolution not to give Whitefield anything for this misguided enterprise, Franklin found himself incapable of keeping his money in his pocket, and gave everything he had when the plate was passed (*Autobiography*, 109). "As he proceeded," Franklin says, "I began to soften, and concluded to give the Coppers. Another Stroke of his Oratory made me asham'd of that, and determin'd me to give the Silver; & he finished so admirably, that I empty'd my Pocket wholly into the Collector's Dish, Gold and all" (*Autobiography*, 109). Another member of the Junto was at the same sermon and had taken the precaution of emptying his pockets before he arrived, but he was so taken with the sermon that he tried to borrow some money from a more resilient neighbor, who answered, "*At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely*; *but not now*; *for thee seems to be out of thy Right Senses*" (*Autobiography*, 110).

In the next section of the work, which the reader is clearly intended to compare to the section about Whitefield, Franklin tells us that he decided to engage in his own public projects. Rather than an orphanage in Georgia, he proposed to create a college and a militia. He delivered a harangue from the same pulpit and in the same building Whitefield had used for his sermon, and convinced his fellow citizens to form a militia. Not having enough good canons for the purpose of defense, Franklin went with two others to New York to borrow some from Governor Clinton. "He at first refus'd us peremptorily," Franklin says, "but at a Dinner with his Council where there was great drinking of Madeira Wine, as the Custom at that Place then was, he soften'd by degrees, and said he would lend us Six. After a few more Bumpers he advanc'd to Ten. And at length he very good-naturedly conceded Eighteen" (*Autobiography*, 114).

Just as Franklin had been softened by Whitefield's oratory, Clinton was softened by Madeira, and, we must suppose, having the agreeable Franklin as a drinking companion. In both anecdotes, there is the same three-step progression, from a firm resolution to give nothing to giving in completely. Franklin had learned that it is possible to persuade the intransigent by driving them out of their right senses. He also learned that it could sometimes be useful to be flexible on the virtue of temperance. Alcohol, Franklin

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concluded, has its uses.[33] Franklin's definition of temperance, we recall, is "Eat not to Dulness, Drink not to Elevation," but it is reasonable to suspect that Franklin came quite close to elevation at the dinner he describes with Clinton (*Autobiography*, 84).

From the errata Franklin learned that if there is an important benefit to be had from bending the rules, and even engaging in what some might call stooping, and no harm to oneself, the rules should be bent. This is the insight that informs his list of virtues with all its caveats and loopholes, and the lessons he continued to learn which are not encompassed by this list. In some sense, this is a Machiavellian lesson, since Franklin learned that the most important consideration is the practical outcome rather than adherence to rules for their own sake. Though the goal, in Franklin's case, is invariably his own happiness, the esteem of his fellow Philadelphians played an essential role.[34]

One further example should suffice to make this point. When it became clear that General Braddock, who had come to defend the colonies and found a complete lack of horses and carriages, was going to return to England, Franklin devised a scheme by which to cajole Pennsylvanians to hire out their horses and wagons. He reprints the advertisement in its entirety, because, he says, it was a "Piece of some Curiosity" (*Autobiography*, 140). The curious thing about it is that it contains a bald-faced lie: the threat that "violent Measures will probably be used" and that "it was proposed to send an armed Force immediately into these Counties, to seize as many of the best Carriages and Horses as should be wanted, and compel as many Persons into the Service as would be necessary to drive and take care of them" (*Autobiography*, 143, 142).[35] There is no evidence that Braddock had ever considered taking such measures. The citizens of the colony, though, Franklin must have thought, had shown that they did not, or could not, understand how important it was to keep this armed force for the purpose of defense, and so Franklin had recourse to this lie to persuade them to do

[33]Indeed, when he was leading his own troops in the building of a fort on the frontier, he suggested to a preacher whose sermons were not well attended the expedient of taking charge of the men's daily ration of rum, and withholding it until after the sermon to ensure their attendance (*Autobiography*, 154). This anecdote is meant to be compared with another in which Franklin withholds rum from some Indians he is trying to make a treaty with until after their business is concluded.

[34]Pangle astutely notes in this regard, "And this benevolence is no small matter. Friendship and trust are essential to happiness, and hence a heartfelt concern with the welfare of others is to be encouraged not just in others but in ourselves. Merely feigning virtue would show that one had missed the great lesson that Franklin spent his life trying to teach: that doing real good is essential to happiness and, thus, that virtues like justice and honesty are not ultimately a sacrifice of self-interest but are integral to the richest happiness" (*Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*, 62).

[35]See Pangle, *Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*, 123.

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what was in their real best interest.[36] Franklin defines the virtue of sincerity as "Use no hurtful Deceit," and this anecdote provides a good example of such a use of non-hurtful deceit (*Autobiography*, 85).[37]

Franklin's writing of the *Autobiography* itself conforms to the insight he learned from his errata. It is, as he suggests in the first paragraph, a flagrant example of his incorrigible vanity, and therefore a transgression of the virtue of humility. In order to fit the pattern set out above, this transgression must have been motivated by Franklin's enlightened pursuit of his own happiness. The most important respect in which this is true of the *Autobiography* becomes clear from two letters Franklin inserts in the second part of the work. According to Abel James, the completed *Autobiography* will "be useful & entertaining not only to a few, but to millions," since he knew "of no Character living nor many of them put together, who has so much in his Power as [Franklin] to promote a greater Spirit of Industry & early Attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance with the American Youth (*Autobiography*, 72–73). Benjamin Vaughan similarly compares it favorably to the works of Tacitus, Caesar, and Plutarch, and says that it is likely to play an important role in "the forming of future great men," especially since Franklin's life is "connected with the detail of the manners and situation of *a rising people*" (*Autobiography*, 72, 74, 77). These two early admirers foresaw that the *Autobiography* would be of inestimable worth to Franklin's posterity. In setting out his life in writing, he had a chance to play an important role in forming the character of all future Americans, and thus to achieve a kind of immortality. This thought must have deeply pleased Franklin.

Conclusion

Franklin's persona in the *Autobiography*, as seen through the lens of the errata, perhaps unlike Franklin himself, had perfectly squared the circle of combining egoism and altruism, and was thus amoral and essentially hedonistic. It never seems to have occurred to Franklin, or at least the character he portrays in the *Autobiography*, that he should act on the basis of

[36]Franklin also incurred great financial risk in this endeavor when he offered to stand surety for Braddock. While this appears to be a purely altruistic act, one that exposed Franklin to the risk of financial ruin, it must be noted that Franklin presents himself here as the linchpin between Braddock and the colonists without which the colony would have been defenseless. This must have surely flattered his pride.

[37]Another example of Franklin's relaxed attitude toward dishonesty used for a good cause is his exculpation of the Presbyterian preacher Hemphill who was discovered to be plagiarizing his sermons. After this discovery, Franklin says, "I stuck by him, however, as I rather approv'd his giving us good Sermons compos'd by others, than bad ones of his own Manufacture" (*Autobiography*, 101). Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God*, 8, notes further that Franklin regularly lied to "strict religionists" about his beliefs.

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anything other than his own good, or more specifically, his own happiness. When we follow the path he sets out in the story of his errata, we see that his understanding of what would make him truly happy changed because of these experiences. While a young man he was charmed by the deism espoused by many of the leading lights of his time. Franklin came to develop his own form of this theory, in which he proclaimed that there was no real distinction between right and wrong, or virtue and vice. The practical effect of adopting deism, though, turned out to be a lack of compunction in acting on his youthful passions and impulses. This, we learn from his discussion of his dissertation and early deism, was the justification for his behavior toward Vernon and Miss Read, which he came to call his great errata. He also found that those whom he had converted to deism had committed great wrongs against him, apparently without any second thoughts.

These experiences taught him that at least in practice, if not in the realm of metaphysics, there was indeed a difference between virtue and vice and right and wrong, and that he should make the pursuit of moral perfection one of the main goals of his life. In fact, reflection on what Franklin learned from the errata reveals that his list of virtues is only an approximation of the most fundamental lesson he derived from them.

Franklin spoke not only of great errata, which caused him, he says, much trouble, but also of errata which, though wrong by any conventional standards, were in fact beneficial, and in two out of three cases, necessary to both his success in life and the moral insight that informed his actions for the rest of his life.

This insight was that the true, but nearly always misunderstood, reason for the rules found in the Bible or in the moral systems of different peoples and philosophers is that they are good for the one who follows them, and are in fact the surest means to one's continual happiness. It was this that allowed Franklin to avoid wrestling with notions of charity, sacrifice, and nobility. He did not struggle with the supposed conflict between egotism and altruism because he came to understand that this was a false dichotomy. Doing good to others, Franklin learned, was the surest way to make oneself happy. Franklin, then, moves from the self-interest of the *Dissertation* to an understanding of self-interest rightly understood.

This lesson, though, was not one Franklin could spell out explicitly with all its ramifications. Most, Franklin thought, would not be able to fully understand this, and would, as he had when younger, act simply on their unexamined inclinations, thinking that whatever conduces to one's happiness is right. Acting on the basis of Franklin's insight, when fully understood, rather than on a list of rules derived from it, would often involve transgressing conventional moral standards. As we have seen, though, the transgressions Franklin commits later in life are in fact motivated by his sophisticated understanding of self-interest and are thus, in one way or another, in the service of his fellow man.

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Franklin has been read in many, and often opposing, ways over the years, and nearly every work about him begins with a statement about the difficulty of knowing who the real Franklin was. This was an intentional strategy on Franklin's part. Many if not most readers will focus on the list of virtues and see Franklin's main purpose in the work as trying to instill these. Franklin, though, also wrote for those more skeptical readers who would not be inclined to accept this teaching at face value, but who could only be taught less directly by leading them to make their own discoveries. For these readers, Franklin hoped to show the worth of virtue to one's happiness through the example of his own life offered as an autobiography.[38] Franklin wanted to teach, through the story of the errata, though, that one could bend the rules of virtue for the sake of happiness only if one had understood that service to others is the surest means to true happiness.

[38]Benjamin Franklin, *Way to Wealth, or Poor Richard Improved* (Philadelphia: Jacob Johnson, 1808), is in some sense dogmatic, but certainly not metaphysical, and, as Forde says ("Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and the Education of America"), Franklin's exhortations to wealth are meant as a first step on the path to virtue for the poor.

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