language on this score can be aversive, such as when he refers to an openness to new life as the "procreative lesion" [128].) While McAleer intends to ground his argument about ecstatic being in the created order in its integrity, the metaphor of wounding would seem to characterize the risks of love in a postlapsarian state. Recall that the wounds of Christ were inflicted upon him violently by sinful men; they did not emerge naturally in the act of creation. One wonders whether McAleer would have done better to focus upon the generosity and receptivity found in the Trinitarian relations as a foundation for the other-centeredness of love. Finally, Thomistic political theorists will likely balk at the negative account of the state offered in McAleer's final chapters. With an uncharacteristic lack of subtlety, McAleer baldly asserts, "[T]he Thomist tradition acknowledges that domination is fundamental to the state" (147). He fails to acknowledge that Thomas considered political authority a natural institution, necessary before the Fall, and possessed of the dignified task of cultivating virtue and coordinating the common good. By contrast, politics, in McAleer's treatment, is sadly reduced: "The point of politics is to retrench higher goods by moderating the pervasiveness of the domination of the state" (148). Those readers who have been sympathetic to McAleer's rich account of metaphysics as a basis for political order will be disappointed by his rendering of politics.

Despite these limitations, *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics* merits careful attention, as it offers an indispensable reminder of the importance of first philosophy for the proper ordering of everything else.

–Jeanne Heffernan Schindler

FRANKLIN AS A PHILOSOPHER

Jerry Weinberger: *Benjamin Franklin: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005. Pp. xvi, 336. $34.95.)

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Jerry Weinberger has written a book like no other about Benjamin Franklin. He has taken more seriously than anyone else the thought that Franklin's writing is multilayered, that no word is misplaced, and that every apparent contradiction or problem points to a hidden resolution that represents Franklin's true teaching. Guided by this approach, Weinberger produces some amazing results. His intensely close readings of Franklin's writings often have compelling force, and no Franklin interpreter henceforth should write without taking them into account. In some instances, however, the readings seem forced, and the reader may wonder with justification whether this is really what Franklin had in mind.

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This book is unusual partly because it is not a biography. There has been an explosion of biographical writing on the American founders in the past decade, and Benjamin Franklin has benefited more than most of them from this attention (partly due to his previous neglect). Only a few of the new books, however, have been systematic explorations of their subject's thought or philosophy. Weinberger's book, while demonstrating encyclopedic familiarity with all the Franklin literature, as well as the whole of Franklin's own oeuvre, does not add to the biographical literature. It is most cognizant of biographical detail—in fact, it uncovers some biographical tidbits that have gone unnoticed—but its quarry is unambiguously the thought, rather than the life, of Dr. Franklin. One of its controversial contentions is that Franklin can be ranked as a philosopher in the higher sense of that word, one whose thought is fully consistent and accounts for all of experience.

One difficulty with pursuing this approach is that Franklin wrote very little in an explicitly philosophic or metaphysical vein, and much of what he did write in this vein he later disowned. In fact, he ultimately disowned "metaphysical reasonings" entirely, he tells us in his *Autobiography*. In Weinberger's analysis, the *Autobiography*, which is Franklin's only lengthy published work, nevertheless, contains the key to Franklin's philosophic thought. It is a very well-hidden key. The standard story of the *Autobiography*, as anyone familiar with Franklin knows, is one of moral fall and redemption. Ben Franklin, a good and sharp-witted boy, is led astray by Deism and philosophy; decides that virtue and vice are artificial distinctions; gets burned by associates whom he convinces of this creed; becomes convinced of the truth of morality; and goes on to become the upstanding statesman and benefactor of mankind that we all know. This is the standard scholarly view because it is the conspicuous story-line of the *Autobiography*. It is what Franklin wishes the readers of the *Autobiography* to think. Yet, Professor Weinberger assures us, it is a "pack of lies."

His first clue to the real story is a good one. Franklin states in part two of the *Autobiography* that he "never doubted" the existence of god, virtue, and particular providence (divine attention to each of us individually). Yet he had told us in part one that there was a period during which he doubted at least the last two of these. He wrote a short piece during this "amoral" phase called *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, which was devoted to the proposition that virtue and vice do not exist. What do we make of this contradiction? Weinberger is correct to chide Franklin scholars for essentially ignoring this rather massive contradiction, central, as it is, to the story of moral redemption. More intriguingly, though Franklin says in the *Autobiography* that publishing the *Dissertation* was a mistake, he pointedly refrains from saying its argument was erroneous. What he does say, in a passage that has always provoked head-scratching, is that he decided that the doctrine of the *Dissertation*, "tho' it might be

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true, was not very useful." He replaced it with the conviction that "*Truth, Sincerity and Integrity*" among men were of the utmost importance.

This is the turning point of the *Autobiography* as morality play, but there is something fishy about it. Franklin abandons truth, in the name of Truth? Standard interpretations (including some offered by this reviewer) have had to explain this away by saying that Franklin here repudiates metaphysics and doesn't quite mean to leave open the possibility that the amoral doctrine of the *Dissertation* might be "true." But to be entirely satisfied with this explanation is difficult. What happens if we take the opposite tack, if we presume that Franklin lays this contradiction before us as a clue? What if we pursue this line of thought with dogged consistency to the very end? Taking us down this road, and rubbing our faces in what we find at the end of it, is the great achievement and virtue of this book. What we find is that the whole tale of moral redemption is a lie—"a really big lie"—a "fraud" perpetrated on the majority of readers, for some very good reasons. What Franklin signals to us with these hints (to the few readers of the *Autobiography* who are astute enough to pick up on the hints) is that virtue and vice in fact do not exist, there is no particular providence, and the best we can do is make our way as pleasantly as possible through this world full of pains as well as joys. Since most human beings are liable to become vicious scalawags if they are told these truths, Franklin hides them behind a public profession of belief in virtue and vice, divine rewards and punishments.

These are breathtaking claims, as Weinberger emphasizes. We all knew that Franklin hid behind masks, some of them layers deep, but this interpretation of where the true core lies is new. It is worth turning the philosophical perspective of this Franklin over in our minds. As Weinberger elaborates it, the perspective entails that there is no moral anchor to human life; that spreading a noble lie about "truth, sincerity, and integrity" is the most useful thing for Ben Franklin to do in his own self-interest; that it is most convenient for him to abide by these principles himself, for the most part; but that in any instance where his own good requires it, he can and will abandon them without scruple. Although Weinberger does not make the connection explicitly, the perspective seems to be essentially that of Machiavelli.

This is "Benjamin Franklin Unmasked," indeed. Weinberger does not base the unmasking exclusively on his interpretation of Franklin's *Autobiography* and *Dissertation*. His book ranges widely across Franklin's writing, displaying the most encyclopedic familiarity I have seen with all of Franklin's work, sometimes bringing out quite obscure pieces from deep within the bowels of the forty-plus volumes of Franklin's collected work. Franklin's biography is scrutinized in great detail for clues as to his intellectual development, and the trail is followed with great ingenuity. For example, Franklin says in his *Autobiography* that he moved from an aggressive style of disputation, inspired by readings of "polemical divinity," to Socratic-style refutations inspired by Xenophon, and finally to a modest form of conversation

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also inspired by Socrates, but without refutations. Weinberger meticulously lines up these periods with Franklin's writings to chart Franklin's intellectual odyssey. He concludes that what Franklin learned from his early, polemical stage was the danger of antagonizing the good and the just with aggressive disputation (he had to flee Boston partly for this reason). He then pursued Socratic refutations, despite the (lessened) danger, in order to arrive at his amoral conclusions. Once he had satisfied himself of the truth of these conclusions, he spent the rest of his life as a modest concealer of what he had learned. He thus arrived at his truths by Socratic "dialectic" (phase two), not by abstract "metaphysical reasoning" (phase one). This observation is important to Weinberger's argument because Franklin repudiated "metaphysics" early on, and Weinberger denies that this was an abandonment of rigorous philosophical thinking per se. Franklin came by his understanding of the groundlessness of virtue and vice in Socratic fashion, by examining the common opinions of virtue and vice, and convincing himself of their incoherence.

Weinberger points out, quite aptly, that many of the occasional pieces Franklin inserted into his *Gazette*, depicting an array of bizarre human behaviors, amount to a kind of commentary on human foibles and human folly. Among the truths Franklin discovered in his Socratic refutations was the stubbornness of human folly. He became aware, according to Weinberger, that the root of the human belief in virtue and vice, in god, and in god's providence, lay in the desperate human longing for a cosmos that cares, in which individual lives have significance. Franklin's twin discovery was that no such cosmos exists and that this human longing is ineradicable—hence, the danger of antagonizing the good and the just and the endlessness of human folly.

Weinberger makes good sense of an impressive range of Franklin's writings in this way, and he is tireless in developing the contours of the viewpoint he finds in Franklin. I should almost say that his book is worth reading as an exploration of that quasi-Machiavellian worldview, even if one does not find it plausibly attributed to Franklin.

Here, many readers will balk (and, I suspect, self-restraint will abandon some reviewers): Is this really what lurks behind the masks? Questions can legitimately be raised about some of the interpretations offered by this book. For example, when Franklin says in the *Autobiography* that his early indiscretions might be excused because they had "something of necessity" in them (presumably the passions of youth), does this really imply that greater necessities would excuse any immorality? Is full-blown Machiavellianism really lurking in this statement? Or when Franklin says that the moral is what is good for human beings, "all the circumstances of things considered," is he really hinting that morality is subordinate to circumstance, that any immorality can be excused by the appropriate circumstances? A more natural reading would seem to be that he is referring to our long-range good, or our real, as opposed to our apparent, good. This reading would put Franklin well within the range of conventional moral theories.

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Finally, Weinberger enjoys spinning meanings out of the infamous letter in which Franklin recommends an old rather than a young mistress. In Weinberger's care, this becomes a meditation on the folly of Eros, the longing for inconstant beauty; then a covert recommendation of masturbation; and finally, a doubly covert exhortation to go for the young and beautiful after all, if you can pull it off. All these thoughts may legitimately be provoked by the matter at hand, but are they really in Franklin's letter? In a number of instances, it seems to me, the reader might ask this question.

Many of the book's arguments support the amoral understanding of Franklin by arguing for the incoherence of the ordinary moral perspective. But Weinberger seems often to identify the "moral perspective" exclusively with the most austere sort of Calvinism or Kantianism. Thus, when Franklin says that morality is what is beneficial for us, Weinberger takes this to be essentially a repudiation of morality: morality can have no element of self-benefit, or it loses its moral character. But as I understand them, Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, and Locke, to mention a few, all argue that morality is beneficial to me, all circumstances considered. Franklin's arguments, from this perspective, are not so unusual. I may decide, of course, that these thinkers did not adequately resolve the tension between morality and the individual good, or that Calvin or Kant represents the only defensible moral position. But I would hesitate to conclude from this that Aristotle or Cicero or Aquinas or Locke saw the matter this way, and that their talk of personal benefit was a way of secretly teaching an amoral Machiavellianism between the lines.

Weinberger regards Franklin's apparent lifelong dedication to public service as the most difficult reality to fit into his thesis. According to Weinberger's interpretation, Franklin can have no true dedication to nation, friends, or family. He cannot have been devoted to any "cause." Why, then, did he repeatedly answer the call of public service, even as he complained to correspondents that he would rather retire to his scientific studies? Why did he risk his life by becoming a central mover of American independence? Weinberger argues that Franklin's political activity was an elaborate kind of game or amusement for him, a form of his love of tinkering. Franklin is an "operator," in his view, similar to a big-city boss among political animals. He did occasionally get angry in connection with his political activity, which, Weinberger concedes, tells against his thesis, but he was not, and could never be, according to this understanding, an angry man.

Benjamin Franklin Unmasked is an interesting, amusing, and challenging read. Even those scholars most steeped in Franklin and the Franklin literature will learn something about the man from this book. Their eyes will be opened to facets of his mind they probably had not seen before. Even if they do not agree with Weinberger's interpretation as a whole, their wits will certainly be stretched by it.

–Steven Forde

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