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Achieving Human Perfection: Benjamin Franklin contra George Whitefield

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Two competing strands of intellectual history, which arose from divergent interpretations of human nature, impacted the democratic tradition in the United States. This paper examines this divergence through a succinct comparison of Benjamin Franklin's and George Whitefield's teachings on human perfection. Whitefield's view of perfection is derived from Protestant Christianity and argues that man is called to constantly pursue a personal and earthly unattainable goal. Franklin sought to replace the religious view with one grounded upon enlightenment and sought to establish an earthly perfection, which aligned with his democratic ideal. This view of perfection was attainable to all through the education of the citizens of the new nation in a liberal tradition.

The Perfectibility of Man! Ah heaven, what a dreary theme! … Which of them are you going to perfect? … The perfectibility of man, dear God! … Which of these do you choose to perfect, at the expense of every other? Old Daddy Franklin will tell you. He'll rig him up for you, the pattern American. Oh, Franklin was the first Downright American.

D. H. Lawrence.[1]

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[1] D. H. Lawrence, "Benjamin Franklin," in M. Buxbaum, ed., *Critical Essays on Benjamin Franklin* (Boston, MA: G. K. & Hall, 1987), 40–50, 40. It should be noted that Lawrence's criticism of Franklin's moral virtue is largely based upon the belief that Franklin "established a set of fixed principles – strictly machine-principles" (ibid., 46). If Franklin was truly trying to create a mechanistic approach to achieve virtue, one would expect extremely precise, if not mathematical, definitions of virtue. Yet Franklin's definitions are far from precise; even allowing strong levels of variation in individual application. This paper argues that this is largely because his understanding of perfection allows humans who are liable to err to achieve virtue in a legitimate manner. Franklin's method can best be understood as a new form of democratic habituation (see Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and the Education of America," *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992), 357–68) more closely resembling the Aristotelian understanding of moral virtue (see Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 1104a1–3). Virtue must be approximated in the life of the individual and can vary in application based upon the individual's proclivities (ibid., 1106b1–4).

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the divergent influences of Enlightenment moral philosophy and the moral teachings of Protestant Christianity by contrasting the teachings of two men who left an indelible impression upon American culture: George Whitefield, a religious itinerant preacher, and Benjamin Franklin, a political philosopher. Each man brought an important influence to the developing colonial identity, as each attempted to shape American society through molding individual men. However, the image of man that Franklin and Whitefield wished to inaugurate varied considerably based upon their fundamental philosophic assumptions, evidenced in divergent understanding of human perfection. Franklin and Whitefield represent a critical juncture in American intellectual history, particularly in the northern colonies, where the Protestant Christian view of human perfection, as expressed in the widespread and influential teachings of George Whitefield, was being challenged by the emerging Enlightenment and liberal understanding expressed in the writings of Benjamin Franklin.[2] While Franklin's pedagogical influence was rooted in Enlightenment liberalism,[3] it was not the exclusive position shaping the intellectual and political development of colonial America. Historians and political theorists have long noted a variety of intellectual strands which influenced the worldview of both the populace and elites in the late eighteenth century, including English common law[4] and classical republicanism,[5] as well as democratic religious themes with roots in the First Great Awakening of 1731–55.[6] Not only were these intellectual

[2] For examples of similar scholarly comparisons between Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards see George Mardsen, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008); Barbara Oberg and Harry Stout, eds., *Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and the representation of American culture* (London: Oxford University Press 1993); particularly Daniel Walker Howe's illuminating chapter "Franklin, Edwards, and the Problem of Human Nature," in ibid., 75–100.

[3] Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's 'Machiavellian' Civic Virtue," in Paul A. Rahe, ed., *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 143–66; Lorianne Smith Pangle, *Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2007); Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[4] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

[5] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[6] Alan Heimart, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); Heimart, "Toward the Republic," in Darrett Rutman, ed., *The Great Awakening* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1970); Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Sanford Kessler, "Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding," *Journal of Politics*, 54, 3 (1992), 776–92; Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and*

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traditions running concurrently with one another, they were also being comingled, particularly the religious and republican sentiments[7] which coalesced in the political actions and philosophy of the founding era.[8]

Yet this comingling created a people of paradoxes as Americans, like their Enlightenment European counterparts, were forced to assimilate their religious and philosophic histories.[9] As Pangle properly noted, "the question remains whether the moral and political understanding of men like Franklin … can be adequately interpreted as a continuation of the Christian tradition."[10] This paper argues that Franklin's fundamental view of human perfection is a foundational and philosophic break with the Christian, particularly northern Protestant, view expressed by George Whitefield. The examination of these competing views shows how the rational enlightenment conception of human nature as expressed by Franklin is rooted in his commitment to democratic man and fundamentally differs from the religious view of human nature. Finally, this paper concludes by exploring the reasons Franklin may have wished to present a variant standard of human perfection.

It is important to analyze these differences between Whitefield and Franklin first because they were, to some degree, friends.[11] Second, as contemporaries,

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Canada (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992); Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, 2003); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Hugh Heclo, *Christianity and American Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[7] Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[8] James Kloppenberg. "The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse,"*Journal of American History*, 74, 1 (1987), 9–33; Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1998).

[9] Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). Kammen directly ties the paradoxical influences upon the American people to the teachings of Benjamin Franklin contrasted with religious teachings of the era (see ibid., 111 ff., also 193 ff.). See also James Ceaser, Jack N. Rakove, Nancy L. Rosenblum, and Rogers M. Smith, *Nature and History in American Political Development: A Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[10] Pangle, *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 21.

[11] Melvin Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975); John Williams, "The Strange Case of Dr. Franklin and Mr. Whitefield," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 102 (1978), 399–421; Harry Stout, "George Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin: Thoughts on a Peculiar Friendship," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, third series, 103 (1991), 9–23; Frank Lambert, "Subscribing for Profits and Piety: The Friendship of Benjamin Franklin and George White," *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 50, 3 (1993), 529–54; Kerry Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1999).

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both Whitefield and Franklin established democratic paradigms which impacted future generations of Americans[12] while using communicative modes that formed an American "public" identity.[13] Third, while it is impossible to argue that Franklin's view was a direct response to the position of Whitefield, the position espoused in the sermons discussed below, which were published between 1771 and 1772, were widely and repeatedly preached throughout the colonies as far back as 1738.[14] Franklin was well versed in Christian doctrine generally[15] and in the teachings of George Whitefield specifically, having attended his sermons, and having been "employed in printing his Sermons and Journals."[16] It is reasonable to assert that the position espoused by Whitefield was known and that it influenced Franklin's own views, espoused in his autobiography which was composed between 1771 and 1790.

WHITEFIELD: OTHERWORLDLY PERFECTION

George Whitefield was one of the most renowned figures of the First Great Awakening, whose preaching and private advice influenced many religious and political leaders around colonial America.[17] Whitefield's style and content spread around the colonies and left an indelible impression on

[12] Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991); Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*"; Charles Baldwin, "Franklin's Classical American Statesmanship," *Perspectives on Political Science*,41, 2 (2012), 67–74.

[13] Carol Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[14] George Whitefield, *Sermons of George Whitefield*, at www.reformed.org/documents/Whitefield.html, accessed Aug. 2014, Sermon 7.

[15] Owen Aldridge, "The Alleged Puritanism of Benjamin Franklin" in J.A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Reappraising Benjamin Franklin* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), 362–71, 363; Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin Reader*, ed. W. Isaacson (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 412.

[16] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 492. Franklin's printing of Whitefield's sermons not only would indicate his reading of them, given the nature of moveable-type printing, but also created a direct financial interest in the fame and success of Whitefield. Thus, in order to promote Franklin's own financial gains, he "kept Whitefield in the news, often with front-page items in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, which both promoted the evangelist and helped Franklin to solicit subscriptions for forthcoming Whitefield publications." Mardsen, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, 53. For an examination of the content and influence of Colonial American newspapers see Stephen Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution," in B. Bailyn and J. B. Hench, eds., *The Press and the American Revolution* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 23–45; David Copeland, *The Idea of a Free Press: The Enlightenment and Its Unruly Legacy* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

[17] Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 103.

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American Christianity, emphasizing its democratic character.[18] Yet, when examining the teachings of Whitefield, particularly when comparing them to Benjamin Franklin's teachings, it is indispensable to point to the warning that Franklin gave about Whitefield and his sermons.

Franklin warned that if Whitefield had merely been an orator, he would have "left behind him [a] much more numerous and important sect … as there being nothing of his writing on which to found a censure and give him lower character."[19] Whitefield's rhetorical skill clearly brought him numerous followers, and the value of a teaching based upon oral tradition not only allows for the fog of memory to shade any difficult or offensive dictate, but also permits teachings to be more easily adapted to new necessities. As if to offer an example for his lesson about Whitefield, Franklin immediately turns from discussing Whitefield's written work to contrasting the Quakers with the Dunkers on this issue of written doctrine. As Franklin witnessed while a representative in the Pennsylvania Assembly, the Quaker doctrine of pacifism frequently hindered the protection of the colony or the assistance of others. Because the doctrine was written, Quaker representatives had to be absent on key votes[20] or use carefully constructed phrases with obfuscated meanings such as writing "bread, flour, wheat, or *other grains*" in a bill to provide gunpowder to New England.[21] In contrast, Franklin praises the Dunkers, whose founder stated,

> When we were first drawn together as a society … it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so far as to see that some doctrines, which once esteemed as truths, were errors … He has been pleased to afford us farther light and our principles have been improving and our errors diminishing. Now we are not sure we have arrived at the end of this progression, and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge; and we fear that if we should once print our confession of faith, we should feel ourselves bound and confined by it, and unwilling to receive further improvement.[22]

For Franklin, an adaptive religion is far more "prudent"[23] and most easily arises without written doctrine. Written doctrine presupposes, or at least leads followers to presuppose, that there is a rigid perfection at least in the area of the dictate. Clearly the preference for oral versus written doctrine evidences one of the differences between Franklin and Whitefield's view of perfection.

The specificity and finitude of written doctrine make it problematic because not only may it contain "unguarded expressions, and even erroneous

[18] Noll, *History of Christianity*, 93. For a detailed examination of the influence of both speeches and print in forming a public identity, particularly of nonelite sources, see Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*.
[19] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 492.
[20] Ibid., 497. [21] Ibid., 498, added emphasis. [22] Ibid., 499. [23] Ibid.

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opinions," but it also no longer can be "explained or qualified … or even denied"[24] after it had been distributed publicly.[25] Of course, it is because of these written doctrines, and Franklin's employment of printing them through detailed laying of moveable type, that it is reasonable to assert that Franklin was aware of particular expressions and opinions of Whitefield, especially his understanding of perfection.

Whitefield's view of perfection, which was linked to Calvinist Christianity, was that mankind must shake off "the world and worldly affection; to run more swiftly after righteousness, [and] hate your own lives for the sake of Christ."[26] For Whitefield, this life and affection for things within it are to be spurned; thus perfection is not of this world but must be found elsewhere. Therefore man is to shun this life and move toward righteousness. This striving for righteousness was found in Christ, who personified perfection. One must "live in a perpetual habitude of desires, struggles, and yearnings towards an intimate union with Christ, the perfection of righteousness."[27] A person's struggles and yearnings are "perpetual," meaning that they will never be achieved. If man is to strive perpetually after the perfection of righteousness, it insinuates that at least on earth, mankind will never actually achieve its goal. Whitefield makes this idea most evident when he states, "till we come up to the perfection of our heavenly father, we can never be righteous enough, much less perfectly righteous: wherefore, as in this life, men cannot attain to the perfection of their heavenly father."[28] Whitefield distinguishes between what can be achieved in this life and in the next, leaving

[24] Ibid., 492.

[25] It has appeared odd to some that Franklin would warn others of the danger of written doctrine, yet would himself provide such a warning and positive teaching in his own written work. Jerry Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press 2008), 44, examines this question and concludes that Franklin "wrote in such a way that he did not leave unguarded expressions and erroneous opinions as hostages to his enemies." Such a position presupposes that Franklin was a careful writer and teacher and insinuates a hermeneutic which necessitates an attentive reading of Franklin. While I applaud Weinberger's method, I disagree with some of his conclusions.

[26] Whitefield, *Sermons*, Sermon 10. It is necessary to recognize that the Christian view of perfection was not monolithic. Two famous English preachers, John Wesley and George Whitefield, disagreed on the conception of perfection. However, the divergence between Whitefield and Wesley was rooted in the more significant theological dispute between Arminianism and Calvinism (Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 270). Further, their divergence was not over the fundamental conceptions of perfection; both would agree with Whitefield's assertion that "by perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man ruling all the tempers, words, and actions, the whole heart by the whole life" (quoted in ibid., 156). Rather, the disagreement focussed upon its achievability for the Christian in this life.

[27] Whitefield, *Sermons*, 10.

[28] Ibid., 10.

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Christian followers with no hope of being perfect on earth, while assuring perfection in heaven.

Whitefield further clarified his position of disagreement with other Christian preachers whose messages he thought were inaccurate and unbiblical. John Wesley taught that Christians could achieve a sinless perfection prior to their ascension to heaven. Whitefield wrote, "I am sorry, honoured Sir, to hear by many letters, that you seem to own a *sinless perfection* in this life attainable."[29] Any assessment of Christian perfection being achievable in this life was, for Whitefield, false and unscriptural. Dallimore notes that, for Whitefield, earthly perfection stands distinct from true divine perfection, and the best a man can hope to achieve is a mere "heightened state of maturity," not a flawless moral state.[30] Perfection on earth had to be tied to the consequences of God's punishment upon postlapsarian human nature. Whitefield's Christian understanding of human nature is evident: humans are depraved and wholly incapable of achieving moral perfection on earth.

Those who are in heaven are perfect because they are "made perfect."[31] This illustrates that even the attainment of perfection in another life cannot be reached by any particular human action. Rather, perfection was externally imputed to man, regardless of his own attempts. Thus mankind should not desire earthly perfection because it is a mistake to strive for "righteousness by the works" of both "ceremonial … [and] moral law."[32] Rather, mankind should seek justification by "the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ apprehended by faith."[33] The perfection of Christianity, then, was unattainable without a supernatural transformation of man's internal character. Yet even this change was not accomplished through mankind's meritorious actions; on the contrary, it comes from an external source: Christ.

This transformation, for Whitefield, is a necessary but insufficient cause to achieve perfection. He stated, "The most perfect Christian, I am persuaded, must agree, according to one of our Articles 'that the corruption of nature remains even in the regenerate … So that believers cannot do things for God with that perfection they desire'."[34] Even those who have undergone the necessary renewal of their internal character of the heart, according to Whitefield, still stand corrupt. Original sin pervades the actions and motives of mankind and leaves it far short of any perfection. The idea that sin cannot be eradicated even upon conversion was a key position for post-Reformation Protestantism. Despite man's ever-present and visibly noticeable

[29] Quoted in Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, Volume II, *The Banner of Truth Trust* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc., 1981), 66, present author's emphasis.
[30] Ibid., 66. [31] Whitefield, 24. [32] Ibid., 24. [33] Ibid., 24. [34] Ibid., 44.

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corrupt nature, Whitefield nevertheless taught men to "labor to go on to perfection"[35] though such "sinless perfection is unattainable in this life."[36] Thereby, Whitefield commands men to strive for an unachievable goal.

Mankind desires and perpetually strives to return to the state in which he was uncorrupted, for, "as God made man, so God made him Perfect."[37] It is this longing for the prelapsarian state that causes mankind to seek perfection. Yet this pursuit is futile not only because the sentence of exile was proclaimed by God, but also because the enforcement of that sentence prevents man's reentry into the earthly ideal of paradise; for God "placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life."[38] This teaching may appear hopeless and doom man to despair. Even Whitefield preached that man must find perfection not in himself, but in another, to be attained in heaven. It is in light of this despair and necessity to trust another that Franklin is led to interpret Whitefield as making man "naturally half beasts and half devils."[39] Franklin noted that the underlying assumption of Whitefield's postlapsarian view of human nature was the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity, a doctrine which argues that man's heart is wholly inclined towards evil, as a devil, and that such depravity affects man's reason, making him like unto beasts. Because of this view of human nature, for Whitefield, mankind is unable to achieve perfection on this earth.

This emphasis of the locus of mankind's aim away from the earth to a higher heavenly hope caused Franklin to disagree with the colonial pastor Whitefield. Franklin himself seeks to make this difference clear for he includes a mundane story about his accommodating Whitefield as he passed through Philadelphia only to offer the critical reflection of what each man focussed upon. As Franklin states, Whitefield sought "to shift the burden of the obligation from off his own shoulders, and place it in heaven, I [Franklin] had contrived to fix it on earth."[40] For Franklin, this is the central component of that narrative: that each man fundamentally diverges upon the focus of the aim of man. However, it must be recognized that divergence of focus between the heavenly and earthly was only a symptom and not the cause of their disagreement. The reason each aimed at a different standard is because their presuppositions of human nature were fundamentally divergent. Since each viewed the nature of man differently, they then argued for a different aim of man based upon that view of human nature.

[35] Ibid., 7.
[36] Quoted in James Gledstone, *The Life and Travels of George Whitefield* (London: Longmans and Green, 1871), 266.
[37] Whitefield, 24. [38] Genesis 3:24. [39] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 489. [40] Ibid., 491.

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FRANKLIN: HEAVEN ON EARTH, THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIZATION OF PERFECTION

Benjamin Franklin has long been praised as one of America's greatest founders; he lived an exemplary life and made many significant contributions to science, politics, and philosophy. Franklin's greatness is not merely because he reached incredible heights, but because in reaching such heights he blazed an impressive trail and showed others that they too could follow the path he trod. Franklin himself was guided by the desire to impart a legacy which would "be serviceable to mankind, to their country, to their friends, or to themselves."[41] The goal of Franklin's writings, particularly his autobiography, was not limited to a mere description of his own life, but he also sought to influence posterity so that his "posterity may like to know" the "means [he] made use of … [in] going from poverty and obscurity of birth to the state of affluence and reputation in the world."[42] For Franklin, being serviceable to the world, his country, and intellectual descendants involved the inculcation of egalitarian principles: the wholly democratic virtue which he espoused shaped the very character of a new nation.[43]

This inculcation is most clearly evidenced in Franklin's codicil to his will dated 23 June 1789, in which he states, "I wish to be useful even after my death, if possible, in forming and advancing other young men, that may be serviceable to their country."[44] This benefit to posterity would come through Franklin's writings, particularly "a little Work for the Benefit of the Youth, to be call'd *The Art of Virtue*,"[45] which, though never published, as a standalone moral treatise, seems to have been encapsulated as part of Franklin's autobiography.[46] Just as the method of physical science would "render [mankind], as it were, masters and possessors of nature,"[47] Franklin agreed with Enlightenment thought that a rational methodological approach to virtue would lead to the proper formation of human nature, for himself and others.[48] To inculcate these principles in posterity, Franklin sought to improve upon other moral teachers not merely by proclaiming a goal, but also by offering a methodology which was exhibited through real-life

[41] Ibid., 81.
[42] Ibid., 401.
[43] Ibid., 479; Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*"; Baldwin, *Franklin's Classical American Statesmanship*.
[44] Franklin, 389.
[45] Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, at www.franklinpapers.org, accessed Aug. 2014, letter to Lord Kames, 1760.
[46] Norman Fiering, "Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue," *American Quarterly*, 30, 2 (1978) 199–223, 200.
[47] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Chicago: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 32.
[48] Howe, "Franklin, Edwards, and the Problem of Human Nature," 74.

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examples.[49] Through this methodology, his readers could emulate Franklin's actions, as far as the principles were "suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated."[50] Franklin recognized that the inculcation of virtue required comradery and habituation, and thus he proposed a club entitled the Society of the Free and Easy, which would be composed of "young and single men." Each of these men would adhere to Franklin's religious creed and "should have exercised himself with the thirteen weeks' examination and practice of the virtues."[51] This group was to be useful by "forming a great number of good citizens."[52] The habituation that these men learned would benefit society as a whole, as they would be good citizens in America or any other country.

Even the discussion of his thirteen virtues – arguably Franklin's central theme and the topic of detailed scholarly inquiry[53] – was a "bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection."[54] Despite the emphasis on Franklin's method, previous scholars have not focussed enough on understanding the goal of "moral perfection" within his teachings. Therefore an appropriate understanding of Franklin's teaching of virtue requires that one first understand Franklin's concept of human perfection, as discussed throughout his writings.

According to Franklin, "men are endowed with Reason," which is the teacher of the duties they have on this earth.[55] Franklin's view of human reason does not accept the Christian doctrine of corruption of original sin.

[49] Both in his autobiography and in the letter to Lord Kames in 1760, Franklin uses virtually the same expression in arguing the value of his work, by stating that his book would be "distinguished" "from the mere exhortation to be good, that does not instruct and indicate the means, but is like the apostle's man of verbal charity, which only without showing to the naked and hungry how or where they might get clothes or victuals, exhorted them to be fed and clothed" (in Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin Reader*, 476). This is echoed in his letter to Lord Kames, stating, "To exhort People to be good, to be just, to be temperate, &c. without *shewing* them *how* they shall *become* so, seems like the ineffectual Charity mention'd by the Apostle, which consisted in saying to the Hungry, the Cold, and the Naked, *be ye fed, be ye warmed, be ye clothed*, without shewing them how they should get Food, Fire or Clothing" (Franklin n.d. *Letter to Lord Kames May 3, 1760*). What is seen in Franklin's writings, which will be explored further within this work, is Franklin's belief that his moral teachings are both different to and a practical improvement on the lessons of Scripture. This is, at least one of the reasons why Franklin sought to reestablish a democratic moral virtue, which has "no mark of any distinguishing tenets of any particular sect … [so] that it might be serviceable to people in all religions … [and] not have any … sect against it." Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 475–6.

[50] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 402. [51] Ibid., 479. [52] Ibid., 480.

[53] Clinton Rossiter, "The Political Theory of Benjamin Franklin," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 76 (1952), 259–93; Fiering, "Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue"; Lawrence, *Benamin Franklin*; Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's 'Machiavellian' Civic Virtue."

[54] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 467. [55] Ibid., 40.

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For Franklin, both the reason and the pathos of individuals influence choices in each particular circumstance, but sometimes reason does not always prevail because humans frequently seek the easiest path.[56] This different understanding of the effect of original sin and the role of reason led to his divergent view of man's ability to become perfect. Perfection is not an absolute moral standard of action; rather it is an individual standard based upon the influence of reason and its application to exogenous circumstances. One of Franklin's major criticisms of the moral teachings of the Bible was that they exhort mankind towards an end, but fail to provide the necessary method for attaining that end. Franklin's own writings, particularly his moral teachings, are viewed as a practical improvement of the lessons of the Bible, as he offers himself as an example of how one can achieve the goal.[57]

While there has been much discussion of Franklin's thirteen virtues – what they are, whether they are properly called virtues, and whether they are compatible with the classical and Christian teachings of virtue – previous scholars have not adequately focussed on apprehending the object of his teachings, i.e. "arriving at moral perfection."[58] Franklin's writing was designed to be pathfinding because it demonstrated that posterity can achieve both virtue and perfection since it had already been achieved by another.

Franklin's teaching of virtue was an attempt to provide men not only with a technique that they can utilize, but also with a clear goal that can realistically be achieved through diligent effort. While several scholars have debated the precise nature of Franklin's teaching on morals, it is evident that Franklin sought them to be "as uncontroversial and universally applicable as possible."[59] The evidence for their universality can be found not only in the understood purpose of the work,[60] but also in the very definition of the virtues. While each virtue may, upon initial glance, appear strict and narrow,[61] a deeper analysis finds that there is often wide latitude in what constitutes following the virtue. For example, *Sincerity* is defined as "use not hurtful deceit, think innocently and justly, and if you speak, speak accordingly."[62] This definition may appear to ban deceit, however, it only prohibits deceit which brings about harm to oneself or another. "Harmless" deceit is permitted. Franklin himself recognized that following each virtue strictly was impossible, but one would be much more improved by the concerted effort than if one failed to improve oneself at all.[63]

[56] Ibid., 154.
[57] See footnote 49 for further explanation.
[58] Franklin, 467.
[59] Pangle, *Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*, 67.
[60] Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*".
[61] Lawrence, *Benjamin Franklin*, 46.
[62] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 468.
[63] Ibid., 475.

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Franklin's virtue, then, was a liberal virtue, one that did not presuppose a rigid and absolute definition; rather it would promote democratic ideals and was flexible and accessible to the majority of mankind. Franklin desired to develop a standard for "excellence … [that] does not dictate that one crucify the self or even that one put others first, but it does demand an enlightened attention to the ways in which the good of others dovetails with one's own."[64] Franklin notes in "Self-Denial Not the Essence of Virtue"[65] that a virtue is not enhanced if one has to do it against one's own inclination, or if there is some sort of internal fight over the motive of the action. This shows that the reason behind the action is less important to its virtue than the success of the action. In other words, Franklin's teaching was one founded upon the modern liberal theory of an enlightened self-interest.

Franklin clearly rejected the Christian concept of perfection for "mankind cannot in this life be so perfect as an angel."[66] This is because man, though guided by reason, makes mistakes. As Franklin's alter ego, Poor Richard, stated, "To err is human."[67] Franklin recognized that a proper understanding of human nature requires a recognition that errors will occur; in many cases these errors are not to be faulted. For Franklin, the errors of humanity are defensible lack of knowledge or improper uses of reason. Franklin showed this most overtly through his sly alteration of Alexander Pope's famous words "Immodest works admit *no* defense, the want of modesty is the want of sense" to the more benign "immodest words admit *but this* defense, the want of modesty is the want of sense."[68] While Franklin should not be thought a Platonist, this justification of man's errors as being due to lack of knowledge echoes the philosophic position of Plato; men err not because of an inherent evil nature within them, but rather because they do not know how they should act.[69] It is through offering a different foundation for, or source of, human frailty that Franklin begins to illuminate a different understanding and path to human perfection. If men's errors are not, as Christianity expressed by Whitefield argues, a flaw in their very nature, but rather an ignorance in their knowledge, then there is a practical solution to men's errors: instruct them to use reason and follow the correct habits.

Reason, for Franklin, is to be the ultimate guide of human actions. This notion was most clearly and humorously demonstrated in Franklin's mocking account of a preacher steadfastly holding to the inerrancy of Scripture in the light of reason and human errors. Franklin recounted an error he made in printing a Bible:

[64] Pangle, 70. [65] Franklin, *Papers*. [66] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 84.
[67] Franklin, *Papers*. [68] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 415–16, added emphasis.
[69] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, ed. Allan Bloom (Basic Books 1991), 357d; 863c.

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where David says *I am fearfully and wonderfully made, I omitted the letter (e) in the last word*, so that it was, *I am fearfully and wonderfully mad*; which occasioned an ignorant preacher, who took that text, to harangue his audience for half an hour on the subject of *spiritual madnesss*.[70]

Two lessons can be extrapolated from Franklin's story. First, mankind, at times, will make errors, so Franklin believes it is inherently foolish to strive for the Christian goal of prelapsarian perfection. Second, Franklin argues for the common understanding of reason to be the primary hermeneutic in the interpretation of the Bible. This can also be applied as the hermeneutic for interpreting all teachings. Franklin showed that it was foolish to assume that David would say he was "mad" and, using reason, the hearers should have been able to understand that the word "mad" was really an error. This primacy of reason in the interpretation of man's actions leads to an accommodation of errors, for "whoever accustoms himself to pass over in silence the faults of his neighbors, shall meet with much better quarter from the world when he happens to fall into a mistake himself."[71] Since errors are part of human nature, Franklin believes that it is best to accommodate them rather than disparage them, and instead work for improvement. In this way each individual will be more accepting and understanding of the rest of society.

Franklin's greatest treatment of human perfection occurred in his discussion questions for the Junto, a club he began in order to consider questions of moral and natural philosophy. One question Franklin postulated was, "Can a man arrive at perfection in this life as some believe, or is it impossible as others believe?"[72] Franklin recognized that those who argue that perfection is impossible on this earth hold an erroneous position on the concept of perfection; this is not based upon willful error, but on divergent definitions. Thus, in the very same discussion, Franklin indicated that the disagreement between himself and Whitefield occurred because "they differ in the meaning of the word perfection."[73] The identification of variant definitions allows a thoughtful reader to reassess Franklin's purpose: to replace the previously held position on perfection as espoused by Christianity and exhibited by Whitefield with an understanding that is consistent with reason and accounts for man's nature, which may err.

It is critical to note that Franklin did not wish to discuss whether man can or will become perfect in heaven. Rather, he placed the discussion firmly "in this life." This does not mean that Franklin failed to consider otherworldly perfection. Instead, he wrestles with Whitefield's concept by stating, "If they mean a man is not capable of being so perfect here as he is capable of

[70] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 51, original emphasis. [71] Ibid., 52. [72] Ibid., 83.
[73] Ibid., 83.

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being in heaven, that may be true likewise."[74] While Franklin was not willing to dismiss the veracity of such a claim, he only tentatively concurs because perfection in heaven was a topic outside the realm of human reason. The reader should note that the statement was posed as a hypothetical that "if" then they "may" be correct. This cautious acceptance corresponds to his belief that error "is common in metaphysical reasoning."[75] Therefore Franklin posed merely hypothetical connections. This was similar to what he did in *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, where he remarked that the reader can "easily perceive what I design for demonstration, and what for probability only."[76] Without necessarily contradicting Whitefield's conclusion, Franklin argued that the question to be posed was not about what will happen in heaven since that cannot be known, but instead about what is possible on earth.

Franklin stated that it is nonsensical to argue that "man is not capable of being so perfect here, as he is capable of being here."[77] Using a foundation of reason – the law of noncontradiction – Franklin shows that any statement that denies the perfectibility of mankind on earth and is grounded upon earthly definitions is contradictory. This standard, as well as the argument to prove its possibility, was based upon man's reason and was a new and radically different standard than that of Whitefield's Christianity. Franklin's standard asserted that "the perfection of anything [is] to be only the greatest the nature of that thing is capable of."[78] Thus it must be recognized that "different things have different degrees of perfection, and the same thing at different times."[79] This statement is of the utmost importance in properly assessing Franklin's teaching on perfection and consequently in understanding his virtues. For Franklin, perfection is not a single absolute standard for all, but rather each class of things has its own perfection and each thing can be considered perfect at various points depending on its relative standard.

It is difficult to understand how someone can be the "greatest the nature of the thing is capable of,"[80] yet also more perfect at a different time. This tension does make sense, however, if one recognizes that, for Franklin, not only is learning the virtues a progressive effort, but also one's actions are a consequence of habituation. Franklin states, "Habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason."[81] This statement indicates that Franklin's understanding of perfection allowed for a progressive growth in habit and that, with effort, one could suppose "the habit of that virtue so much strengthened and its opposite weakened."[82] This allowed

[74] Ibid., 84.
[75] Ibid., 451.
[76] Ibid., 31.
[77] Ibid., 84.
[78] Ibid., 83.
[79] Ibid., 84.
[80] Ibid., 83.
[81] Ibid., 468.
[82] Ibid., 471.

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him to focus on the next virtue. Franklin's methodology of inculcating virtue allows for continued growth.

Franklin's own life shows the evolving nature and meaning of his virtues, particularly of chastity and frugality. For chastity, Franklin's definition allows a wide latitude of sexual activity. To him, being chaste means to "Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation."[83] And yet, how to measure "rarely" depends on the individual. Within his own life, Franklin notes that "hard-to-be-governed passion of youth hurried me *frequently* into intrigues with low women that fell in my way, which ere attended with … a continual risk to my health,"[84] and such encounters are not in fact in violation of the virtue of chastity. Franklin allowed such variance in his virtues because of different individuals' abilities to fulfill a strict standard and his preference to allow some leeway so that all men would be able to achieve the virtue. This is also why frugality is defined as "Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e. waste nothing."[85] And yet, when one becomes wealthy, as Franklin eventually did, it is not prodigal to purchase china and silver spoons for breakfast, even as the china "augmented gradually to several hundred pounds in value" because "our wealth increased."[86] Frugality is to be followed at all times, for both the poor and the rich, yet once one has achieved wealth, the "expenses to do yourself good"[87] are much greater than when one is poor and therefore frugality is relative to the wealth of the individual.

Franklin's perfection exists in different degrees, for something can be perfect in itself, but be more or less perfect when compared to another. As Franklin notes, "An horse is more perfect than an oyster, yet the oyster may be a perfect oyster as well as the horse a perfect horse."[88] This statement is difficult to disentangle, because both are as perfect as "their nature is capable of,"[89] yet somehow he still asserts that the horse is more perfect than the oyster. Franklin sheds light on this seemingly problematic idea when he later states that "an egg is not so perfect as a chicken, nor a chicken as a hen; for the hen has more strength than the chicken, and the chicken more life than the egg: yet it may be a perfect egg, chicken and hen."[90] Here Franklin presented more information on his hierarchy of perfection. The possession of more life (actual versus potential) means that in comparing two things – the one with the potential to achieve something and the other which already possesses it – the possessor is "more perfect" than the

[83] Ibid., 469.
[84] Ibid., 461, emphasis added.
[85] Ibid., 468.
[86] Ibid., 466.
[87] Ibid., 469.
[88] Ibid., 84.
[89] Ibid., 83.
[90] Ibid., 84.

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being that only has potential to possess it since the value of any good, for Franklin, is based upon "its usefulness, and the great good it does to society."[91] It is also possible to take this distinction and apply it to mankind. A child is a potential possessor of reason, but a man is (or at least should be) a full possessor of reason. A child is less perfect than a man, but may be a perfect child. Yet the possessor of potential is not yet transformed into the mature version of the possessor of the actual quality, and as such is less useful and still less perfect than he could be. This explains why Franklin allowed a time variance in the perfection of something, for progressive growth will change from potential to actual, thus allowing the ability to be as perfect as the nature is capable of and yet still become more perfect.

Moreover, Franklin specifically made a distinction on the basis of strength. He stated, "The hen has more strength than the chicken."[92] While chicken is the species' name, hen refers only to the female of the species. Franklin insinuated that the female hen has more strength than the male chicken, i.e. rooster. Yet, in this point, Franklin wrote not about strength as in might, but rather in reference to usefulness. The hen is more useful in at least two ways. First, the hen produces eggs which can be hatched or eaten by another. Stated differently, the hen is capable of both creating and sustaining life. Second, while both hen and rooster can be eaten, a hen is generally the more edible of the two. Therefore the hen is more useful for itself by way of propagation and for others by providing food both in eggs and in its own body. This significance indicates that strength, according to Franklin, should be understood by a being's utility to itself and others. Thus, in understanding the hierarchy of perfection, Franklin argued that something more useful is more perfect than something less useful, though both may be as useful as their own nature allows.

The reader should also note that Franklin showed that different degrees of perfection can exist in "the same thing at different times."[93] The relation of time to perfection is important, and, as discussed earlier, is related to potentiality and actuality. However, Franklin also demonstrates that some external influences are beyond the control of man because "a perfect man" is only "as perfect as his present nature and circumstances admit."[94] This question of circumstances and their effect upon perfection shows that exogenous influences can limit the perfection some beings can expect to have. As Poor Richard says, "It is hard for an empty sack to stand upright."[95] Franklin indicates that the ability to achieve virtue can be influenced by being "free from debt, which exposes a man to confinement, and a species of slavery to his creditors."[96]

[91] Ibid., 72; see also 408.
[92] Ibid., 84.
[93] Ibid., 84.
[94] Ibid., 84.
[95] Ibid., 480.
[96] Ibid., 480.

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Franklin recognized that necessity constrains and enslaves; therefore actions that occur under such a constraint are not truly free. In such cases, mankind is not "capable" of acting otherwise, and, as such, he can be perfect. Even if necessity dictates that man act in a way that he would not if he had the freedom of choice, such action is consistent with "the greatest [way] the nature of that thing is capable of" given the constraints of necessity.[97]

Franklin understood that there were many exogenous circumstances that directed his actions, for "[f]avorable circumstances and situation … preserved me, through this dangerous time of youth … without any willful gross immorality."[98] Though there may have been things that appeared immoral or not virtuous, he deemed none of them willful. Franklin defined this: "I say willful, because the instances I have mentioned had something of necessity in them, from youth, inexperience, and the knavery of others."[99] This statement indicates Franklin's belief that one's ability to be perfect to "the greatest the nature of that thing is capable of"[100] is related to one's youth, experience, and circumstances.

In summary, Franklin argued for a new definition of "moral perfection" that accounts for man's limitations. This belief is why so many of his virtues, which are the method to moral perfection, have caveats that allow man to have what Franklin views as harmless foibles. Franklin's story of the speckled ax best exemplifies his teaching, for it recognizes the major components of human nature:

> The man who, in buying an ax of a smith, my neighbor, desired to have the whole of its surface as bright as the edge. The smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the wheel; he turned, while the smith pressed the broad face of the ax hard and heavily on the stone, which made the turning of it very fatiguing. The man came every now and then from the wheel to see how the work went on, and at length would take his ax as it was, without farther grinding. "No," said the smith, "turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by-and-by; as yet, it is only speckled." "Yes," said the man, "but I think I like a speckled ax best."[101]

[97] Ibid., 84. There seems to be some level of ambiguity in Franklin's understanding of the freedom of action in relation to the constraints of necessity. As Pangle, *Political Philosophy*, 65, notes, Franklin "seems to be hedging, almost willing to grant that souls are governed by inner necessities that do not leave them free to be more sensible than they are, and yet still not prepared to rule out some modicum of freedom that he never explains. The same ambiguity pervades the *Autobiography*. Franklin shows great gentleness, great understanding of human faults, characterizing his own faults as errata or inadvertent misprints, yet still holding himself to account for them."

[98] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 452. [99] Ibid., 452. [100] Ibid., 83.

[101] Ibid., 474.

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First, the ax is not as perfect as it could conceivably be. According to Franklin, ultimate perfection may be possible in a theoretical sense, but man's desire for it is weighed alongside the physical effort necessary to achieve that level, and the man's fatigue meant the ax fell short of the ideal. For Franklin, perfection is constrained by the capabilities of each individual. Thus perfection must be defined not as an objective standard that all must meet but as a fluid concept that allows variations within the product: a more or less speckled ax. Franklin's new standard of moral perfection is one which is individual and recognizes what is best given one's individual constraints. Thus perfection is no longer associated with a strict universal standard; rather it is fluid and relative to the situation. This explains why Franklin's methodology, the virtues, is wrought with exceptions such as "Chastity: Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation," or "Sincerity: use no hurtful deceit."[102] These definitions do not require strict abstinence or truth, but rather allow variation for each man to determine for himself precisely when his or her health necessitates sexual activity and whether or not a lie would be hurtful. "We learn enough in the autobiography to realize that each of the loopholes in this definition is deliberate; if Franklin had viewed the virtue more strictly, he might have been forced to give up on it."[103] The existence of purposeful loopholes allows one to understand why Franklin's errata support his broader view of human perfection. As Franklin notes, there are a few actions of his life which, upon mature and more informed reflection, would be corrected if he "were to live it over again,"[104] yet in the moment "weighed little on me."[105] This is explained by recognizing that all choices are constrained by the surrounding circumstances and knowledge; they can still be the best decision in the moment while recognizing that upon later knowledge and reflection they ought to be corrected. Franklin presented a view of perfection that required a loose interpretation of virtue, thus allowing more men to be able to achieve the teaching he presented because perfection is relative to one's situation and knowledge. It is through his careful introduction of a new definition of perfection – one based upon utility and relative to individuals – that Franklin was able to encourage man to foster and accomplish what he deemed to be virtuous perfection.

[102] Ibid., 469. [103] Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*," 359.
[104] Franklin, *Franklin Reader*, 438; see also 351. [105] Ibid., 418.

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CONCLUSION

As this paper argues, eighteenth-century colonial America contained a variety of intellectual and philosophic influences, some that had fundamental conflicts on the nature of man[106] and yet were often comingled[107] in paradoxical political expressions of the American people.[108] This leads to the question whether the expressions rooted in Enlightenment liberalism are philosophically consistent with, or a fundamental break from, Protestant Christianity.[109] This paper has illustrated the divergent worldviews as they relate to human nature and perfection through the ideas of Franklin and Whitefield. While both men idealized democracy, they disagreed on the *telos* of human nature, particularly about the understanding of man's perfection and its attainability in this world. Whitefield's democratic idea was founded upon the assumption of a fundamental equality of mankind, men who had fallen from perfection into sin. Thus, for Whitefield, earthly moral perfection is humanly unattainable, and all such striving leaves man in a perpetual state of failure. Mankind's unsuccessful attempts merely serve as a constant reminder of weakness and imperfection. The only way perfection can be achieved is through redemption in Christ; even then, moral perfection is not truly attained until one reaches heaven. Thus Whitefield denies the ability for man to achieve the highest end and as such teaches man to seek help from another for that which he himself cannot attain.

However, it is precisely this conclusion of finding help in another that set Franklin's view apart. As Fiering states, Franklin "explicitly rejected almost all concern with the reformation of the heart or with the need for internal change as a necessary preliminary and foundation for virtue"[110] because mankind, through hard work, can achieve such virtue. This arises because Franklin argued for the common understanding of reason to be the primary guide for human morality rather than revelation. His understanding of these Christian elements – namely the total depravity of man and the necessity of redemption only through the mediatorial work of Christ, leading to perfection being achieved only in heaven – caused him to devise a new standard of moral perfection that he believed to be both attainable by humans and less restrictive in its understanding of the virtue of man. Additionally, this redefinition would benefit civility amongst citizens and promote a democratic theory of tolerance. Mankind learns to accept errors in himself and others,

[106] Ceaser, *Nature and History*.
[107] Bloch, *Visionary Republic*; Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism*.
[108] Kammen, *People of Paradox*.
[109] Pangle, *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 21.
[110] Fiering, *Benjamin Franklin*, 206.

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leading to an accommodation, for "whoever accustoms himself to pass over in silence the faults of his neighbors, shall meet with much better quarter from the world when he happens to fall into a mistake himself." Franklin recognized that for liberal democratic values to continue, there must be a way for man to achieve variant levels and tolerate those who differ. This necessitated a recognition of the weakness inherent in human nature – "To err is human." By presenting a view of human perfection which is based on the human nature of imperfection, Franklin was able to root liberal democratic values upon a standard of constant self-improvement tempered with tolerance.[111] Thus, the acceptance of Franklin's liberal education necessitated a rejection of fundamental Calvinistic Christian beliefs that were dominant in colonial America.

[111] Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*".

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