

Benjamin Franklin's "The Art of Virtue" as DIY  
Michael Ditmore, Pepperdine University

**Abstract:** Teaching Franklin's "Art of Virtue" (part two of the *Autobiography*) is a "do-it-yourself" project that can take two related paths: having students practice Franklin's scheme for "moral perfection" (by using printouts or online materials) and then engaging in close reading of the scheme itself, focusing especially on the exemplary chart and the advice for "humility." The teacher will also want to focus on related concepts and contexts in Franklin's life, in the *Autobiography*, and at the time of composition.

**Keywords:** Benjamin Franklin; The *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*; Self-improvement and success literature; Moral literature; Books and printing; Enlightenment

Part two of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* – often called "The Art of Virtue" from the title of the planned-but-never-published treatise described there – is surely *the* most popular (and detachable) section of Franklin's most enduring writing. The visual illustrations, including a token daily schedule and a sample page from his scheme for moral perfection, capture the attention of readers thumbing through the pages and give them a recipe for success to cook up on their own. Franklin submits his less-than-secret formula for worldly success, happiness, and (maybe) moral perfection. Or at least for rationalizing ineradicable imperfection. And it is a relatively brief, mostly self-contained digression wherein Franklin's persona is on full display: the ambitious, independent DIYer honing social skills; the precociously driven and earnestly didactic prankster; adaptive and principled, market-driven and steadfast, seemingly intimate but reticent –forgivably arrogant, and scandalously amusing, entirely himself and entirely anonymous. To boot, it is easy to read, without having to know so much of places and names now obscure (although it certainly helps to know them, to get the full effect). Shrewdly revolutionary for the sake of social and commercial advantage, it is, in short, a perfect classroom text for multiple kinds of classrooms, one that richly repays innumerable readings and never fails to elicit enlightened chuckling at the self-knowing Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In a 1761 letter to Lord Kames, Franklin dated the project's origination to 1732 (*Papers* 9:374-77), but the most illuminating reference outside of the *Autobiography* came in another letter to Lord Kames (*Papers* 9:103-6, rpt. in *Norton* 224-25), wherein Franklin, alluding to the New Testament epistle of James, describes his project as an art and method at acquiring habits toward perfection (rather than mere exhortation), especially "of great Service to those who have not Faith [in Christ], and come in Aid of the weak Faith of others ... It is in short to be adapted for universal Use."

"The Art of Virtue" wellnigh teaches itself. It is, in a strong sense, a device less to be "read" than operated, and in fact the first thing a teacher can do is to assign students to exercise the system themselves for at least a week or two. In one way or another, it will feel familiar to many students, and some are likely to take to it. For the less industrious, various versions will be available for download through the internet and there are even smartphone apps of it, but, really, anyone adept at word processing or spreadsheets can create a fairly exact version of the entire booklet in less than a half hour. (To complicate matters slightly, Franklin did not claim that his list of virtues was complete or eternal, so one will find "modernized" versions with more or fewer virtues. Because I'm something of a purist, I'd stay strictly with the version outlined in the *Autobiography*.) But, as simple as the scheme sounds, setting up the assignment requires some explanation. Doing so, however, will enable readers better to see the general values that undergird the scheme and the implications that ensue from it.

In keeping with Franklin's own experience, activating "The Art of Virtue" may be most humiliating and challenging to the authority of teachers themselves, implying that they remove themselves and freely let autodidacts do it for themselves. To heighten the stakes, the premiere self-educated *wunderkind* Franklin finally advises readers to imitate arguably *the* two greatest teachers ever, no intermediary necessary. Part two, in fact, is all about *teaching* (and *learning from*) yourself (and others) – it is *about* Franklin's education at the crucial time in his life that he finally got his feet seriously on the ground. Franklin ably demonstrates how little *he* ever needed a teacher, and he expects likewise from us all. He outlines a real-life lab experiment in consciously crafting and disciplining the self one wants to be and do.

The best advice I could offer teachers, therefore, is to allow "The Art of Virtue" to teach itself, with some braking and steering assistance. Offer students the option of experimenting with the method themselves. Treat the account as the first in a long, crowded line of self-help manuals, organizational guides, calendars, schedulers, practical ethical treatises, and maps for success (unlike, if not antithetical to, the belletristic fare that still dominates literature classrooms). Approach it in the spirit of making recipes or assembling machines: dissect the process to consider and weigh each part individually and *in seriatim*, and then critique the whole operation. It is vital to twist, push, and tweak the operation and its parts, to test its limits and prove its purpose, to catch its internal self-critique *and* its implicit claims to outdo the competition, all while grasping that an extraordinary ideological revolution of self-invention is underway. Franklin the tradesman would have fully appreciated the cliché of taking it out for a spin before

purchasing – and "The Art of Virtue" is exactly the kind of practice one buys or not. *Caveat emptor!*<sup>2</sup>

Virtually all approaches to the *Autobiography* emphasize part two because it brilliantly unifies several part one themes and moves from the striving, obscure Benjamin to the public, internationally renowned Dr. Franklin, whose fame and accomplishments he charts in parts three and four. It is the plot for his success.<sup>3</sup> I especially stress three aspects of part one. First is Franklin's **trope of life-as-a-printed book**, drawn from his printing career and formulated in his characterization of early misdeeds and moral lapses as "faults" and "errata" (printers' terms for careless slips). Typically, Franklin's trope is understood as a remapping of Christian penance that acknowledges regret and failure while alleviating the conscience. But "The Art of Virtue" twists this trope significantly by temporarily mapping lapses in virtue onto a blank form (like a ledger) and then homogenizing its failings as erasable, indistinguishable black marks rather than as differently sized, memorialized, and blottable incidents, as would happen in a verbalized account.<sup>4</sup>

Second, part two reflects the entrepreneurial application of **reason** to eradicate superstition and for inventive problem-solving, while acknowledging its limitations for basic human drives and impulses. (Franklin's hilarious rationalization in part one for eating freshly fried cod against

---

<sup>2</sup> A person with modest typing and word processing skills can produce a version of Franklin's "little Book" in a half hour or so, but those who are impatient can download any number of ready-made pdf's. For the more old-fashioned, there have been various small-press print bastardizations, but for the digitally advanced there are now smartphone apps. How extensively (or seriously) these more or less literal reproductions are in use is anyone's guess, but self-help gurus of any number of stripes rarely let slip the opportunity to trot out Franklin. Certainly, the project is a forerunner of personal how-to guides of incalculable ubiquity. Students may be familiar with the FranklinCovey line of personal productivity, leadership, and time management materials, inspired by Hyrum W. Smith's reading of Franklin's *Autobiography*. (Smith's company, Franklin Quest, merged in 1997 with Covey Leadership Center, established by Stephen R. Covey, bestselling author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.) Students will certainly have been bombarded a wide variety of more or less professional organizational helps, self-esteem messages, etc., in their school years, all comparable and more or less traceable to Franklin's project. For a contemporary survey, see Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, which opens by comparing Franklin and Covey.

<sup>3</sup> Virtually all sustained, and even most superficial, treatments of Franklin sooner or later touch on "The Art of Virtue," but for especially focused and helpful readings, see Anderson, Fiering, Jehlen, Lemay, and Stallybrass, as well as the helpful *Norton* excerpts (223-28).

<sup>4</sup> Two print sources are excellent: James N. Green, "Benjamin Franklin, Printer," in *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World* and James N. Green and Peter Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer*. Both contain full-color reproductions of Franklin's print productions. Four websites are commendable: Library of Congress, "Benjamin Franklin ... In His Own Words"; Lemay's *Benjamin Franklin: A Documentary History*; Green and Stallybrass's web companion to their print volume; and *The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary*, an all-encompassing website created for the Franklin's 300 birthday and to accompany the traveling library exhibit.

his vegetarian principles is key: "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do" [28].)

Third, Franklin commends **imitation**, a neoclassical aesthetic principle audaciously appropriated to living rather than ancient models: Franklin hyperboldly offers *himself* in the opening paragraph of part one as "fit to be imitated" (1). Yet imitation need not mean servile duplication or exact copying; as in his imitations of *The Spectator* essays, he "sometimes had the Pleasure of Fancying" that he "had been lucky enough to improve" on the original (12), a key point of hilarity to bear in mind in approaching imitation in "The Art of Virtue."

It is also important to establish some context for composition, including and aside from what Franklin himself supplies. He had written part one 13 years earlier, in 1771 during a "Country Retirement" (9) at in Twyford, Hampshire, England at the residence of Jonathan Shipley, Bishop of St. Asaph. Franklin wrote a separate outline and arranged part one in a mostly chronological manner, with some digressions, from some family ancestry up to the year 1730, when he "set on foot [his] first Project of a public Nature, that for a Subscription Library," a pivotal point in his career (67). He set aside the manuscript, taking it back with him to Philadelphia in 1775 and shortly after depositing it, with other papers, to the care of political ally Joseph Galloway before leaving on his diplomatic mission to France in October 1776 – and apparently forgot about it. Something of an accident reawakened his interest eight years later, and Franklin took the unusual step of documenting this step in the *Autobiography* itself, by inserting letters from two correspondents encouraging him to continue the memoir.

The first is from Philadelphia Quaker attorney Abel James, who had come into guardianship of the trunk of papers Franklin had entrusted to Galloway. To Franklin's chagrin, Galloway had thrown in his lot with the Loyalists, for which he was convicted of treason in Pennsylvania. He and his daughter Elizabeth fled to England, leaving behind his wife Grace Growden Galloway to hold on to the properties in Philadelphia against confiscation by the revolutionaries. When she was forcibly evicted in 1778, James was appointed to legally represent the family's interests. It was in the course of the legal proceedings that he came in to possession of the trunk of Franklin's papers. That, briefly, is the background for the encouraging letter from James which Franklin directed to be inserted into the autobiography itself (69-70); to spur Franklin, James included a copy of the original outline (195-98). Franklin then relayed the outline and James's letters to another confidante, Benjamin Vaughan, for advice. Vaughan in 1779 had edited a collection of Franklin writings, *Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces*, and so had

both familiarity and interest in publishing Franklin; additionally, Vaughan was also in Paris the English delegation for peace negotiations. Vaughan enthusiastically seconded James's recommendation but also pointedly called attention to Franklin's "Art of Virtue" (70-74; see also Vaughan's letter to Franklin of May 1785 [235-36]). "Art of Virtue" is listed on page 2 of the outline (196).

The inclusion of these letters is in itself a peculiar gesture that signals a significant change in the autobiography. They break the fictional frame established in part one, of the memoir being addressed specifically to his son William. At the same time, Franklin determinedly ignored his immediate living and political arrangements in composing part two, instead maintaining and extending the chronological focus from where he left off in part one. Briefly: in 1784, when he wrote part two, the widowed, 79-year-old Franklin wrote resided in Passy, a Parisian suburb, having helped negotiate the Treaty of Paris that officially closed the Revolutionary War and while impatiently awaiting dismissal orders for his return to Philadelphia. (By this point, Franklin had resided less than three of the previous 27 years in America.) During his eight years in France, he had worked as a diplomat, been celebrated in salons, flirted (and proposed), witnessed balloon experiments, dismissed Mesmer's claims of animal magnetism for a royal commission, and set up a small press to print bagatelles.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1771, two major related developments had occurred, neither of which Franklin allowed into his text. First, as Franklin noted, "The Affairs of the Revolution occasion'd the Interruption" (57); but, second, that had also meant bitter and lasting estrangement from his illegitimate son William who, as royally appointed governor of New Jersey, had remained a firm Loyalist. Meanwhile, Franklin had taken William's own illegitimate son, William Temple Franklin, on as personal secretary/assistant (and brought grandson Benjamin Bache in tow). Franklin had framed part one in letter form to William, but he could hardly retain this device. But neither did he remove it, and in part two he quietly drops this fiction to address a broad reading public.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Stacey Schiff narrates Franklin's eight years in France in *A Great Improvisation*. Franklin's determination to avoid the chaos and embarrassments (and celebration and triumph) of those years might prompt an interesting avenue of discussion: how might we relate the clarity and nostalgia of Franklin's recounting his scheme after negotiating the revolutionary foundation of a new nation while residing in *l'ancien régime* amid uncertainty, dissension, and backbiting? It could be read alongside other Franklin writings of the period: "The Twelve Commandments," "The Morals of Chess," and "Information to Those who Would Remove to America."

<sup>6</sup> Part two originally appeared, independently and abridged, in French translation twice in 1798; it first appeared properly incorporated in *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (edited by

Moreover, part two is a digression from the narrative thread, the one time in the book that Franklin ponders a half-century of experience. Finally, it describes, and substitutes for, a treatise on morality and virtue Franklin had discussed and planned but never got off the ground. And yet Franklin attributes his enormous public success precisely to this project, another of his many inventions for public improvement. I frame class discussions of part two around four areas: (1) What is moral perfection? Is it practically attainable? How would its attainment be demonstrated

---

grandson William Temple Franklin, published 1817-1818). No copies of Franklin's book, either on paper or on ivory, survive, although Temple claimed to have had the latter.

or signified? (2) How does Franklin use material print processes and organization – bookmaking, in short – in constructing and measuring his self's discipline, appearance, and success? (3) What can Franklin have meant in advising himself and readers to "imitate Jesus and Socrates"? (4) Key concepts/terms: *fault* (and its earlier synonyms from part one, *erratum/errata*), *happiness/felicity*, *habit/habitude*, *virtue*, *method*, *reason*, *imitation*.

Despite Franklin's disclaimer that he "was but a bad Speaker, never eloquent, subject to much Hesitation in [his] choice of Words, hardly correct in Language" (76), his masterful prose begs to be performed for full effect, with an ear for ironic implication and qualification. The following order works to lay out the basic project; the italicized passages suggest discussion and assignment prompts.

**The goal/problem:** Franklin is vague about exactly what motivated him to "conceive" of "the bold and arduous Project," but his account follows his dissatisfaction with the sectarian dogmatism of Presbyterian sermons and the substitution of his private "little Liturgy" of 1728 (66). Obviously, Franklin determined to take religious and moral matters into his own hands, at a crucial time that he was working to establish his "Credit and Character" (64), in a sense working out his own salvation. His life had stabilized and become burdened with responsibilities of family, business, credit, and public concerns; he had reached a stage of religious independence in which restrictive, institutionalized dogma paled next to rational experimentation, implementation, and practice derived from wide reading and empirical observation. But it would be going too far to say that he was hatching a new religion; instead, Franklin believed he had distilled elements common to all religion and had devised an effective means for its practice.

Franklin clarifies the "moral Perfection" he aimed at: "I wish'd to live without committing any Fault at anytime [sic]; I would conquer all that either Natural Inclination, Custom, or Company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not *a/ways* do the one and avoid the other" (66). Once the chuckling and razzing subsides, students will want to consider Franklin's seemingly naïve ambition and the chagrin at failure. They likely will dismiss the goal as ridiculously cockeyed, especially given the mature Franklin's not-so-sly ironies against himself. But they will have to reckon why Franklin in failure did not abandon his project and slink back to his Calvinist roots, or just indulge himself.

Instead, Franklin – mechanical whiz, resourceful tradesman, aspiring scientist – "contriv'd a Method" to neutralize and overcome the obstacles he had discovered. Despite its simple

appearance, there are complications and subtleties that require us to read between the lines and cross-reference forwards and backwards to grasp its mechanics.

**Catalog of Virtues.** Franklin's sources for the "various Enumerations of the moral virtues" are unclear, but, complaining of number and variability, he catalogued twelve (later thirteen) virtues. This provides a good place to pause with students, who may not have seriously considered how they would go about constructing a moral system of their own, not one inherited, assumed, or imposed. *What is a "virtue"? Can you improve Franklin's list? Would you add, delete, alter any? Which are most (or least) valuable – or attainable? Are they all "moral"? What is morality if this catalog is its signification?* For each virtue he composed "**a short Precept**," a motto along the pithy, punchy lines of Poor Richard's advice. *How do the mottoes clarify the "extensive" meaning of each virtue? Select one or two for closer examination.* Franklin's **arrangement** was deliberate. He acknowledged the impracticality of tackling them all at once, but he considered that "the previous Acquisition of some might facilitate the Acquisition of others" (68). *How clear is the rationale for Franklin's order of virtues? Select a run of three virtues and hypothesize about how mastering one might facilitate the mastery of the succeeding one, etc. What is morality if it cannot be attained all at once, or if it requires sustained, extensive effort?*

Franklin then committed himself to "**daily Examination**" and the construction of a "**little Book**" (easy enough for a printer to concoct in spare time, since much of his business derived from blank forms) in which to register the results. *How closely does Franklin's verbal description align with the sample page?*<sup>7</sup> Using this method, Franklin gave "**a Week's strict attention** to each of the virtues successively" (70). While focusing on that week's virtue, he marked all violations. Thus he could complete an entire cycle four times a year. *Is a week sufficient time in which to master a virtue? Is it fair to describe Franklin's project as more cyclical than linear?* Finally, Franklin notes explicitly how he could demonstrate that he had attained moral perfection: "I should be happy in viewing **a clean Book** at the conclusion of a cycle" (70). *Did Franklin ever view such "a clean Book"? But is such cleanness merely a negative trait? Does not committing a fault for an extended time equate to moral perfection, at least in that category?*

---

Thus concludes Franklin's basic account of his method, which resembles a bookkeeping procedure except that it tracked only violations and not positive acts (expenses but not revenue, we might say). It is worthwhile to scrutinize the **sample page** itself, acknowledging the limitations of an isolated, fabricated instance. (This, by the way, is, perhaps inexplicably, the only example of such page that survives, and it is likely that Franklin haphazardly put one together as a simple example. Yet Franklin is rarely careless.) It is the first week of a new cycle and Franklin has already failed, every single day (but without other charts for comparison we cannot judge whether this was a good, bad, or average week); there is a grand total of 16 marks altogether, but Franklin made an encouraging beginning by perfectly mastering Temperance, his primary goal. But the next precept, Silence, was troublesome; he violated it four days out of seven (*twice* on Sunday!); his next week might be difficult. Order was also challenging (as he shortly explains): he kept that column clear only on Wednesday. As for the remainder, there is a sprinkling of marks for Resolution, Frugality, and Industry. Quantitatively, his worst days were Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Friday, with three marks each; his best days were Wednesday and Saturday, with but one mark each. As for everything on the list from Sincerity down, Franklin was absolutely – well, faultless, if not perfect.

But taken literally, the "black Mark" method conceals more than it reveals. Because the chart is repeatable and undated there is no way of knowing *which* specific week is reflected here; also, we cannot know how Franklin violated Silence twice on Sunday, or whether the sameness of the black marks safely levels all faults to the same plane. Major and minor violations are leveled so that faults would be identically marked – and identically erased – rendering all faults effectively anonymous, equal, and interchangeable.

Before reflecting on the results and modifications of his experiment, Franklin gives one more chart, an hour-by-hour breakdown of a typical workday, ordered for maximum efficiency and energized by doing good: he kept to an eight-hour workday, with a two-hour lunch; allowed time for "Supper, Music, or Diversion, or Conversation" in the evening (reserving daily examination for bedtime), and got seven hours of sleep a night (72). Again, students are likely to be familiar with organizers of all kinds.

So far, so good. Franklin's project has a refreshing, commonsensical clarity, rhetorical balance, and mathematical neatness to it; it is not tied to any particular custom or tradition, and it combines seriousness with a sly sense of humor. I think it actually *is* a universal, one-size-fits-all scheme, with some wiggle-room for customization, that ought not crimp anyone, except to his

or her amelioration. For the remainder of part two Franklin resumes the rambling, advice-dispensing of old men (8) by proffering lengthy reflection, both of the outcome and the prospective book. But he is at his very knottiest here. Attuning ourselves to his nuances will require renewed attention to tone and implication, but that will hardly prevent us from becoming the butt of his subtlest jokes or from wrangling with discomfiting, half-hidden paradoxes about life from one of its most inventive practitioners.

Franklin's first modification is laugh-provoking and practical. He had *expected* to find "a clean Book" at cycle's end, but he "was surpris'd" – *really?* – to discover himself "so much fuller of Faults than [he] had imagined." At that, entirely unsurprised readers will smirk condescendingly, but Franklin pulls the rug from under their own smug self-righteousness: he "had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish" (71). Perfectly baited readers will be perfectly stung. He knows we will scoff at his absurd over-confidence; he also knows we will be pulled up short to consider that it was an effective project.

Still, there was a material problem created by all these faults: as he scraped out the marks on the book's paper to make ready for a new cycle, Franklin wore holes in the paper. That he had so many marks to scrape out is itself accusingly, and amusingly, telling, but he wanted to avoid the trouble of creating new booklets and gives his dumbfounding solution deadpan: "I transferr'd my Tables and Precepts to the Ivory Leaves of a Memorandum Book, on which the lines were drawn with red ink that made a durable stain, and on those Lines I mark'd my Faults with a black Lead Pencil, which Marks I could easily wipe out with a wet sponge" (71). A brilliant sleight-of-hand rhetorician, Franklin sometimes recounts staggering and combustible concepts in the plainest, most innocuous terms, expecting us to form the punchline on our own, because it may be too risqué to utter out loud (and would only ruin the effect if he did). Here, he describes a mundane and common enough practice, using a pocket-sized erasable tablet he sold through his own shop, but to detect Franklin's drastic overhaul of Christian penitentialism, one need only think of Isaiah 43:25 ("I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins," KJV) and ask: according to normative Christian theology, how exactly does such blotting occur?

Although Franklin's execution of the scheme gradually diminished to "only one in several Years" and then not at all, he writes that he "always carried [his] little Book" him (71). From there, Franklin's reflections elaborate along five lines: *order* as his most vexing virtue (with the difficult speckled axe proverb); handwritten "imitation" of print; the project's non-sectarian,

universal practicability; the failed book project; and humility, the added virtue. All five deserve extended reflection, but here I will focus only on the most charged and beguiling of them: *humility*.

Franklin's discussion of humility is one of his most remarkable passages, knee-slappingly downright funny and breathtaking, brazenly obnoxious. Nothing prepares readers for the unforgettable closing paragraphs, a *tour de force* of paradox filled with nuances and tones that require keen sensitivity and a funny bone that can flirt with religious scandal. He makes a confessional detour, sharing unsolicited information by adding that his "List of Virtues contain'd at first but twelve" – *Which one was missing? How could he have overlooked one?* – until an unidentified "Quaker Friend having kindly inform'd [him] that [he] was generally thought proud" – *really?* – "[that] Pride show'd itself frequently in conversation; that [he] was not content with being in the right when discussing any Point, but was overbearing and rather insolent; of which he convinc'd [him] by mentioning several Instances" (75). The solution echoes Franklin's earlier account of his progress through argumentative styles (13-14). Convinced and aiming to "cure [himself] of this Vice or Folly," Franklin "added Humility to [his] List, giving extensive Meaning to the Word" (75). But several pages have passed since we last saw that list; we will need to flip back to see where and how he added it. Bearing in mind that he arranged the order of virtues to facilitate their progressive acquisition, where would we expect him to add this new virtue – beginning, middle, or end? Anyone remotely Puritan knows where it *should* go: at the very beginning, at the foundation. So, of course, Franklin positioned it at the *end*, as an afterthought, the virtue to which he gave the least amount of targeted attention. Take *that*, kind Quaker friend.

*How could he have forgotten Humility? Did the ethical treatises he had surveyed say nothing about Humility or Pride? Why call it "Humility," with all its Christian baggage? Wouldn't "Modesty" have been more appropriate and serviceable?* Franklin has addressed much of this, but, in case our attention has wandered, his discussion of the "extensive Meaning" for Humility helps. *But what was it? What was the motto for humility?* We will have to look back again: "Imitate Jesus and Socrates" (68). That is worth pausing over for considerable time, as it rocks around inside our skulls, individually and collectively. At this point, I will typically write or project this brief, simple-sounding injunction on a wall for everyone to stare at and consider – and ponder – and knit eyebrows – maybe laugh – maybe cringe – maybe ponder some more.

*What kind of advice is that? Is this precept parallel with the other precepts? What has Franklin meant by the term "imitate" elsewhere? Should we expect it to have the same meanings here? Can he have been remotely serious?*

*What would it mean to "imitate Jesus"? And to do so in pursuit of Humility? Does it matter that Franklin chose the name "Jesus" and not the title "Christ" (or a combination)?*

*What would it mean to "imitate Socrates"? What specific traits in Socrates might be described as humble? Franklin's argument styles, including Socratic inquiry in which he "put on the humble Enquirer and Doubter," is helpful in describing how he had come to express himself "in terms of modest Diffidence" (13, emphasis added).*

*What, then, would it mean to imitate Jesus AND Socrates TOGETHER? What (humble) traits did they share in common, and how are they imitable?*

Franklin's curt precept drily rests on volatile assumptions about the authenticity, character, and behavior of both figures – and then about their imitability (and improvability).

Analysis neither lessens nor dulls the less-than-humble but entirely witty and flagrantly outrageous explanation that follows: "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" (74), an admission he makes for no other virtue. He had had a lifelong struggle with *order*, to be sure, but he could not pretend otherwise on that score. *What word describes someone claiming the appearance but not the reality of a virtue?* "Hypocrite," of course, as in someone two-faced or an actor playing a role. But how do we judge a self-described hypocrite who openly admits and even trumpets his hypocrisy – with regard to *humility*, of all virtues, *after* advising one to "imitate Jesus and Socrates"? As the only honest man among the hypocritical rest of us who don't? The paradoxes are only beginning to pile up.

Still, Franklin meant something narrower, more doably down-to-earth: "I made it a rule to forebear all direct Contradiction to the Sentiments of others, and all positive assertions of my own" (75). *That* would have made a helpful precept. Franklinian Humility is tantamount to rhetorical restraint, an argumentative strategy in phrasing and tone, a role-playing *pose* as the most effective means to exercise one's influence without obvious self-aggrandizement, a "Change in ... Manners," as he put it (75).

Lest we miss the connection, we need only scrutinize Franklin's theologically charged wording here: "When another asserted something that I thought an error, *I denied myself the Pleasure* of contradicting him" (75, emphasis added) – and isn't self-denial the essence of

humility? Compare his earlier advice about fundraising: one should keep oneself "as much as [one] could out of sight," similar to several of Franklin's ano-/pseudonymous publications, hoaxes, and personae. Why? As he explained, again in the language of Humility, "The present little *Sacrifice of your Vanity* will afterwards be amply rewarded" (64, emphasis added). Yet Franklin's wording is hilariously, heavily loaded:

I soon found the Advantage of this Change in my Manners. ... The modest way in which I propos'd my Opinions, procur'd them a readier Reception and less Contradiction; I had less Mortification when I was found to be in the wrong.... And this Mode, which I at first put on, with some violence to natural Inclination, became at length so easy and so habitual to me, that perhaps for these Fifty Years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical Expression escape me. (76)

But Franklin is not quite done. One last paragraph is a curtain closer that goes to the heart of all autobiography, to Franklin's own rhetorical prowess, and to the self-consuming character of Enlightenment satire. Reading it aloud never fails to elicit chuckles and nods across a classroom, as students respond not only to the rhythmic vigor of Franklin's prose but to his final unrepentant, intimate, and paradoxical punch-line.

In reality there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as *Pride*. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself. You will see it perhaps often in this History. For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility. (76)

It is at that point that I habitually, if failingly, strive for the virtue of Silence myself.

In recommending this project to his posterity, Franklin boasted that "to this little Artifice, with the blessing of God, their Ancestor ow'd the constant Felicity of his Life down to his 79<sup>th</sup> Year," over a half-century (74). We ought not confuse felicity with achievement, but, given the short list of Franklin's massive and variegated accomplishments and the odds he overcame, that is a quite extraordinary claim. Given the long list, and including his messes and failures, it is small

wonder that many – including perhaps Franklin himself – would include him as a third figure for imitation, although, of course, he would never have done so himself. Not directly, anyway.

Despite what has been termed "Founders Chic," Franklin likely will strike student readers as dry and stuffy (as well as arrogant), so it is important to help them to get the undercutting humor and irony in his many stories and examples. More importantly, assigning them the task of attaining "moral perfection" and then comparing notes with the inventor is the best exercise I can recommend to convey our indebtedness to Franklin – and our differences.

*Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*  
Spring/Summer 2014 (7:1/2)

Works Cited

- Anderson, Douglas. "The Art of Virtue." *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*. Ed. Carla Mulford. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. 24-36.
- Benjamin Franklin ... In His Own Words*. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/franklin-printer.html>
- The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary*. <http://www.benfranklin300.org/index.php>
- Fiering, Norman S. "Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue." *American Quarterly* 30.2 (Summer 1978): 199-223.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*. Ed. Joyce E. Chaplin. New York: Norton, 2012.
- Green, James N. "Benjamin Franklin, Printer." *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World*. Ed. Page Talbott. New Haven: Yale UP, 2005. 55-89.
- Green, James N. and Peter Stallybrass. *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer*. Newcastle-Philadelphia-London: Oak Knoll-Library Company of Philadelphia-British Library, 2006.
- . *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer*. <http://www.librarycompany.org/bfwriter/index.htm>.
- Jehlen, Myra. "'Imitate Jesus and Socrates': The Making of a Good American." *Readings at the Edge of Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002. 13-31, 229-30.
- LeMay, J.A. Leo. "The Art of Virtue" in *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*. Vol. 2 of 3: *Printer and Publisher, 1730-1747*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006. 38-82, 579-582.
- . *Benjamin Franklin: A Documentary History*. <http://www.english.udel.edu/lemay/franklin>
- LeMay, J.A. Leo and P.M. Zall, eds. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1981.
- LeMay, J.A. Leo and P.M. Zall, eds. *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*. New York: Norton, 1986.
- McGee, Micki. *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Schiff, Stacy. *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America*. New York: Henry Holt, 2005.
- Stallybrass, Peter. "Benjamin Franklin: Printed Corrections and Erasable Writing." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 150.4 (Dec. 2006): 553-67. Rpt. in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*. 383-94.

**MICHAEL DITMORE** has been professor of English at Pepperdine University since 1993 and currently serves as chair of the Humanities/Teacher Education Division. He is an early Americanist who has focused mainly on seventeenth-century New England as well as American autobiography, but over the past several years has moved to the Revolutionary and Early Republic periods as well.

Keywords: Benjamin Franklin; The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin; Self-improvement and success literature; Moral literature; Books and printing; Enlightenment. Part two of Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography — often called "The Art of Virtue" from the title of the planned-but-never-published treatise described there — is surely the most popular (and detachable) section of Franklin's most enduring writing. The visual illustrations, including a token daily schedule and a sample page from his scheme for moral perfection, capture the attention of readers thumbing through the pages and g Lessons in Manliness: Benjamin Franklin's Pursuit of the Virtuous Life. This is the post that kicked off the series. In it we discussed Benjamin Franklin's goal of moral perfection and how he set about attaining it through living his 13 virtues. Franklin, a printer, had a small book of charts made up that allowed him to keep track of his progress in living the virtues. You can get your own Benjamin Franklin virtue chart and journal here. Ben admitted that he was never able to live the virtues perfectly, but felt he had become a better and happier man for having made the attempt. Temperance. Ea Franklin's emerging re-popularity stems not only from his storied accomplishments, but from his successful cultivation of personal virtue. In our modern world of often plastic, ignoble and unworldly leaders, a man like Benjamin Franklin would be cooler than the Clintons, even more eloquent than Obama, and far more with it than any given Bush. Franklin admits that he had intended to publish this section as a small book in its own right. Called simply "The Art of Virtue," it would be a guide that told you not only what to do, but how to do it. Had Franklin written the section today in the simple, direct and cozy prose of Dr. Phil, he'd probably have a self-help bestseller on his hands.