

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN,
POOR RICHARD'S ALMANAC,
AND OTHER PAPERS.

By BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

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than the law directed. They were, therefore, by turns constantly with us, and generally he who attended brought with him a friend or two for company. My mind having been much more improved by reading than Keimer's, I suppose it was for that reason my conversation seemed to be more valued. They had me to their houses, introduced me to their friends, and showed me much civility; while he, though the master, was a little neglected. In truth, he was an odd creature, ignorant of common life, fond of rudely opposing received opinions, slovenly to extreme dirtiness, enthusiastic in some points of religion, and a little knavish withal.

We continued there near three months, and by that time I could reckon among my acquired friends Judge Allen, Samuel Bustill, the Secretary of the Province, Isaac Pearson, Joseph Cooper, and several of the Smiths, members of Assembly, and Isaac Decow, the Surveyor-General. The latter was a shrewd, sagacious old man, who told me that he began for himself, when young, by wheeling clay for the brick-makers; learned to write after he was of age; carried the chain for surveyors, who taught him surveying, and he had now, by his industry, acquired a good estate; and said he, "I foresee that you will soon work this man out of his business and make a fortune in it at Philadelphia." He had then not the least intimation of my intention to set up there or anywhere. These friends were afterward of great use to me, as I occasionally was to some of them. They all continued their regard for me as long as they lived.

Before I enter upon my public appearance in business, it may be well to let you know the then state of

my mind with regard to my principles and morals, that you may see how far those influenced the future events of my life. My parents had early given me religious impressions and brought me through my childhood piously in the Dissenting way. But I was scarce fifteen when, after doubting by turns several points as I found them disputed in the different books I read, I began to doubt of the Revelation itself. Some books against deism fell into my hands; they were said to be the substance of the sermons which had been preached at Boyle's Lectures. It happened that they wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them. For the arguments of the deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough deist. My arguments perverted some others, particularly Collins and Ralph, but each of those having wronged me greatly without the least compunction, and recollecting Keith's conduct toward me (who was another freethinker) and my own toward Vernon and Miss Read, which at times gave me great trouble, I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful. My London pamphlet, printed in 1725,* which had for its motto these lines of Dryden:

"Whatever is, is right. But purblind man
Sees but a part o' the chain, the nearest links;
His eyes not carrying to that equal beam,
That poises all above,"

* Dr. Franklin, in a letter to Benjamin Vaughan, dated November 9th, 1779, gives a further account of this pamphlet in these words:

"It was addressed to Mr. J. R., that is, James Ralph, then a

and which from the attributes of God, his infinite wisdom, goodness, and power, concluded that nothing could possibly be wrong in the world, and that vice and virtue were empty distinctions, no such things existing, appeared now not so clever a performance as I once thought it; and I doubted whether some error had not insinuated itself unperceived into my argument so as to infect all that followed, as is common in metaphysical reasonings.

youth of about my age and my intimate friend, afterward a political writer and historian. The purport of it was to prove the doctrine of fate, from the supposed attributes of God, in some such manner as this. That in erecting and governing the world, as he was infinitely wise he knew what would be best; infinitely good, he must be disposed; and infinitely powerful, he must be able to execute it. Consequently *all is right*.

“There were only a hundred copies printed, of which I gave a few to friends; and afterward disliking the piece, as conceiving it might have an ill tendency, I burned the rest, except one copy, the margin of which was filled with manuscript notes by Lyons, author of ‘The Infallibility of Human Judgment, who was at that time another of my acquaintance in London. I was not nineteen years of age when it was written. In 1730 I wrote a piece on the other side of the question, which began with laying for its foundation this fact: ‘*That almost all men in all ages and countries have at times made use of PRAYER.*’ Thence I reasoned that if all things are ordained, prayer must among the rest be ordained. But as prayer can procure no change in things that are ordained, prayer must then be useless and an absurdity. God would therefore not ordain praying if everything else was ordained. But praying exists, therefore all other things are not ordained, etc. This pamphlet was never printed and the manuscript has long been lost. The great uncertainty I found in metaphysical reasonings disgusted me, and I quitted that kind of reading and study for others more satisfactory.”

I grew convinced that *truth, sincerity, and integrity*, in dealings between man and man, were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life; and I formed written resolutions, which still remain in my journal book, to practice them ever while I lived. Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such; but I entertained an opinion that though certain actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them, yet probably those actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us in their own natures, all the circumstances of things considered. And this persuasion, with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian angel, or accidental favorable circumstances and situations, or all together, preserved me, through this dangerous time of youth and the hazardous situations I was sometimes in among strangers, remote from the eye and advice of my father, free from any *willful* gross immorality or injustice that might have been expected from my want of religion. I say *willful*, because the instances I have mentioned had something of *necessity* in them, from my youth, inexperience, and the knavery of others. I had therefore a tolerable character to begin in the world with. I valued it properly and determined to preserve it.

We had not been long returned to Philadelphia before the new types arrived from London. We settled with Keimer and left him by his consent before he heard of it. We found a house to let near the market and took it. To lessen the rent, which was then but twenty-four pounds a year, though I have since known it let for seventy, we took in Thomas Godfrey, a glazier, and his family, who were to pay a

"Seest thou a man diligent in his calling, he shall stand before kings, he shall not stand before mean men," I thence considered industry as a means of obtaining wealth and distinction which encouraged me—though I did not think that I should ever literally *stand before kings*, which, however, has since happened; for I have stood before *five*, and even had the honor of sitting down with one, the King of Denmark, to dinner.

We have an English proverb that says, "He that would thrive must ask his wife." It was lucky for me that I had one as much disposed to industry and frugality as myself. She assisted me cheerfully in my business, folding and stitching pamphlets, tending shop, purchasing old linen rags for the paper-makers, etc. We kept no idle servants, our table was plain and simple, our furniture of the cheapest. For instance, my breakfast for a long time was bread and milk (no tea), and I eat it out of a twopenny earthen porringer with a pewter spoon. But mark how luxuries will enter families and make a progress in spite of principle: being called one morning to breakfast, I found it in a china bowl with a spoon of silver! They had been bought for me without my knowledge by my wife, and had cost her the enormous sum of twenty-three shillings, for which she had no other excuse or apology to make but that she thought *her* husband deserved a silver spoon and china bowl as well as any of his neighbors. This was the first appearance of plate and china in our house, which afterward, in a course of years as our wealth increased, augmented gradually to several hundred pounds in value.

I had been religiously educated as a Presbyterian; but though some of the dogmas of that persuasion,

such as *the eternal decrees of God, election, reprobation, etc.*, appeared to me very unintelligible, others doubtful, and I early absented myself from the public assemblies of the sect, Sunday being my studying day, I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of a Deity—that he made the world and governed it by his providence—that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man—that our souls are immortal—and that all crimes will be punished and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteemed the essentials of every religion; and being to be found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected them all, though with different degrees of respect, as I found them more or less mixed with other articles which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, served principally to divide us and make us unfriendly to one another. This respect to all, with an opinion that the worst had some good effects, induced me to avoid all discourse that might tend to lessen the good opinion another might have of his own religion; and as our province increased in people, and new places of worship were continually wanted and generally erected by voluntary contribution, my mite for such purpose, whatever might be the sect, was never refused.

Though I seldom attended any public worship, I had still an opinion of its propriety and of its utility when rightly conducted, and I regularly paid my annual subscription for the support of the only Presbyterian minister or meeting we had in Philadelphia. He used to visit me sometimes as a friend and admonish me to attend his administrations, and I was now and then

prevailed on to do so, once for five Sundays successively. Had he been in my opinion a good preacher, perhaps I might have continued, notwithstanding the occasion I had for Sunday's leisure in my course of study; but his discourses were chiefly either polemic arguments or explications of the peculiar doctrines of our sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting, and unedifying; since not a single moral principle was inculcated or enforced, their aim seeming to be rather to make us *Presbyterians* than *good citizens*.

At length he took for his text that verse of the fourth chapter to the Philippians: "*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or of good report, if there be any virtue, or any praise, think on these things.*" And I imagined in a sermon on such a text, we could not miss of having some morality. But he confined himself to five points only, as meant by the apostle: 1. Keeping holy the Sabbath day. 2. Being diligent in reading the holy Scriptures. 3. Attending duly the public worship. 4. Partaking of the Sacrament. 5. Paying due respect to God's ministers. These might be all good things; but as they were not the kind of good things that I expected from that text, I despaired of ever meeting with them from any other, was disgusted, and attended his preaching no more. I had some years before composed a little liturgy or form of prayer for my own private use (in 1728), entitled "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion." I returned to the use of this and went no more to the public assemblies. My conduct might be blamable, but I leave it without attempting further to excuse it; my present purpose being to relate facts and not to make apologies for them.

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at *moral perfection*. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time, and to 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 *always* do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my attention was taken up and care employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded at length that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous was not sufficient to prevent our slipping, and that the contrary habits must be broken and good ones acquired and established before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore tried the following method.

In the various enumerations of the *moral virtues* I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. *Temperance*, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking; while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mentally, even to our avarice and ambition. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary

or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

The names of *virtues*, with their precepts, were :

1. TEMPERANCE.—Eat not to dullness ; drink not to elevation.

2. SILENCE.—Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself ; avoid trifling conversation.

3. ORDER.—Let all your things have their places ; let each part of your business have its time.

4. RESOLUTION.—Resolve to perform what you ought ; perform without fail what you resolve.

5. FRUGALITY.—Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself ; that is, waste nothing.

6. INDUSTRY.—Lose no time ; be always employed in something useful ; cut off all unnecessary actions.

7. SINCERITY.—Use no hurtful deceit ; think innocently and justly ; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.

8. JUSTICE.—Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

9. MODERATION.—Avoid extremes ; forbear resenting injuries, so much as you think they deserve.

10. CLEANLINESS.—Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.

11. TRANQUILLITY.—Be not disturbed at trifles or at accidents common or unavoidable.

12. CHASTITY.

13. HUMILITY.—Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

My intention being to acquire the habitude of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to

fix it on *one* of them at a time ; and when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another ; and so on till I should have gone through the thirteen. And as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arranged them with the view as they stand above. *Temperance* first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up and a guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, *silence* would be more easy ; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ear than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and jesting, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave *silence* the second place. This and the next, *order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. *Resolution*, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues ; *frugality* and *industry* relieving me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of *sincerity* and *justice*, etc., etc. Conceiving, then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his "Golden Verses," daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I ruled each page with red ink,

so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I crossed these columns with thirteen red lines, mark-

FORM OF THE PAGES.

TEMPERANCE.

Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.

	Sun.	M.	T.	W.	Th.	F.	S.
Tem.							
Sil.	*	*		*		*	
Ord.	*	*			*	*	*
Res.		*				*	
Fru.		*				*	
Ind.			*				
Sinc.							
Jus.							
Mod.							
Clea.							
Tran.							
Chas.							
Hum.							

ing the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues; on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every

fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.*

I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus in the first week my great guard was to avoid every day the least offense against *temperance*; leaving other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked Tem. clear of spots, I supposed the habit of that virtue so much strengthened and its opposite weakness that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could get through a course complete in thirteen weeks and four courses in a year. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and having accomplished the first proceeds to the second, so I should have, I hoped, the encouraging pleasure of seeing on my pages the progress made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots; till in the end, by a number of courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean book after a thirteen weeks' daily examination.

This my little book had for its motto these lines from Addison's "Cato:":

"Here will I hold. If there's a power above us
(And that there is, all nature cries aloud
Through all her works), He must delight in virtue;
And that which He delights in must be happy."

* This little book is dated *Sunday*, 1st July, 1733.—W. T. F.

Another from Cicero :

“O vitæ Philosophia dux! O virtutum indagatrix expultrix-que vitiorum! Unus dies, bene et ex præceptis tuis actus, peccanti immortalitati est antependendus.”

Another from the Poverbs of Solomon, speaking of wisdom or virtue :

“Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

And conceiving God to be the fountain of wisdom, I thought it right and necessary to solicit his assistance for obtaining it; to this end I formed the following little prayer, which was prefixed to my tables of examination for daily use :

“O powerful Goodness! bountiful Father! merciful Guide! Increase in me that wisdom which discovers my truest interest. Strengthen my resolution to perform what that wisdom dictates. Accept my kind offices to Thy other children as the only return in my power for Thy continual favors to me.”

I used also sometimes a little prayer which I took from Thomson’s “Poems,” viz. :

“Father of light and life, thou Good Supreme!
O teach me what is good; teach me Thyself!
Save me from folly, vanity, and vice,
From every low pursuit; and feed my soul
With knowledge, conscious peace, and virtue pure;
Sacred, substantial, never-fading bliss!”

The precept of *order* requiring that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*, one page in my little book contained the appended scheme of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day.

I entered upon the execution of this plan for self-examination and continued it with occasional intermissions for some time. I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish. To avoid the trouble of renewing now and then my little book,

SCHEME.

		Hours.	
MORNING.	The <i>Question.</i> What good shall I do this day?	5	Rise, wash, and address <i>Powerful Goodness!</i> Contrive day's business and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study and breakfast.
		6	
		7	
		8	Work.
		9	
		10	
NOON.		11	Read or look over my accounts and dine.
		12	
		1	
AFTERNOON.		2	Work.
		3	
		4	
EVENING.	The <i>Question.</i> What good have I done to-day?	5	Put things in their places. Supper. Music or diversion or conversation. Examination of the day.
		6	
		7	
NIGHT.		8	Sleep.
		9	
		10	
		11	
		12	
		1	
		2	
		3	
		4	

which, by scraping out the marks on the paper of old faults to make room for new ones in a new course, became full of holes, I transferred 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 marked my

faults with a black-lead pencil, which marks I could easily wipe out with a wet sponge. After awhile I went through one course only in a year, and afterward only one in several years, till at length I omitted them entirely, being employed in voyages and business abroad with a multiplicity of affairs that interfered; but I always carried my little book with me.

My scheme of *order* gave me the most trouble, and I found that though it might be practicable where a man's business was such as to leave him the disposition of his time, that of a journeyman printer, for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observed by a master who must mix with the world and often receive people of business at their own hours. Order, too, with regard to places for things, papers, etc., I found extremely difficult to acquire. I had not been early accustomed to *method*, and having an exceedingly good memory, I was not so sensible of the inconvenience attending want of method. This article, therefore, cost me much painful attention, and my faults in it vexed me so much, and I made so little progress in amendment and had such frequent relapses, that I was almost ready to give up the attempt and content myself with a faulty character in that respect. Like 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 further

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!*" And I believe this may have been the case with many who, having for want of some such means as I employed found the difficulty of obtaining good and breaking bad habits in other points of vice and virtue, have given up the struggle and concluded that "*a speckled ax is best.*" For something, that pretended to be reason, was every now and then suggesting to me that such extreme nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself to keep his friends in countenance.

In truth, I found myself incorrigible with respect to *order*; and now I am grown old and my memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it. But on the whole, though I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it; as those who aim at perfect writing by imitating the engraved copies, though they never reach the wished-for excellence of those copies, their hand is mended by the endeavor and is tolerable while it continues fair and legible.

It may be well my posterity should be informed that to this little artifice, with the blessing of God, their ancestor owed the constant felicity of his life

down to his seventy-ninth year, in which this is written. What reverses may attend the remainder is in the hand of Providence; but if they arrive, the reflection on past happiness enjoyed ought to help his bearing them with more resignation. To *temperance* he ascribes his long-continued health and what is still left to him of a good constitution; to *industry* and *frugality* the early easiness of his circumstances and acquisition of his fortune, with all that knowledge that enabled him to be a useful citizen and obtained for him some degree of reputation among the learned; to *sincerity* and *justice* the confidence of his country and the honorable employments conferred upon him; and to the joint influence of the whole mass of the virtues, even in the imperfect state he was able to acquire them, all that evenness of temper and that cheerfulness in conversation which makes his company still sought for and agreeable even to his young acquaintance. I hope, therefore, that some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefit.

It will be remarked that though my scheme was not wholly without religion, there was in it no mark of any of the distinguishing tenets of any particular sect. I had purposely avoided them; for being fully persuaded of the utility and excellency of my method, and that it might be serviceable to people in all religions, and intending some time or other to publish it, I would not have anything in it that should prejudice any one, of any sect, against it. I proposed writing a little comment on each virtue, in which I would have shown the advantages of possessing it and the mischiefs attending its opposite vice. I should have called my book "The Art of Virtue," because it would have shown the

means and manner of obtaining virtue, which would have distinguished it 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, who, without showing to the naked and hungry how or where they might get clothes or victuals, only exhorted them to be fed and clothed (James, ii., 15, 16).

But it so happened that my intention of writing and publishing this comment was never fulfilled. I had, indeed, from time to time put down short hints of the sentiments and reasonings to be made use of in it, some of which I have still by me; but the necessary close attention to private business in the earlier part of life and public business since have occasioned my postponing it. For, it being connected in my mind with a *great and extensive project* that required the whole man to execute and which an unforeseen succession of employments prevented my attending to, it has hitherto remained unfinished.

In this piece it was my design to explain and enforce this doctrine, *that vicious actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful*, the nature of man alone considered; that it was, therefore, every one's interest to be virtuous who wished to be happy even in this world; and I should from this circumstance (there being always in the world a number of rich merchants, nobility, states, and princes who have need of honest instruments for the management of their affairs, and such being so rare) have endeavored to convince young persons that no qualities are so likely to make a poor man's fortune as those of *probity* and *integrity*.

My list of virtues contained at first but twelve; but