

Virtuous Victims of an Enlightenment Paradox.

By Philip Santa-Maria

Benjamin Franklin takes time to address two different audiences in his famous autobiography. Part One is dedicated to his son William. But the rest of the *Autobiography* reads much like a pocket guide for the youth of the 19th century. Franklin wrote his guide to, “benefit the young reader by showing him from my example” (FPR 46). Part Two focuses more on Franklin’s “bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection” (148). Franklin’s passion for passing on his neo-classical virtues was so strong that he actually wanted to write a book exclusively on the subject titled *The Art of Virtue* (79). He states clearly that he wished to conquer his own natural inclinations (71). It is in chapter five of *The Autobiography* that Franklin devises the moral skeleton of the rest of his book, that which was to benefit the young reader.

By creating virtuous standards in *The Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin developed a sound and palpable benchmark for the enlightened modern man. Consequently, Franklin bifurcated the spirit of man into malfunctioning myopic halves. The enlightened man favored reason, virtue, and liberty. However, it is in the proliferation of enlightenment ideals, and the insistence that reason and virtue were the only means to liberation, that the structure of modernity crumbles upon an unstable and paradoxical foundation. It is modernity’s ignorance of the necessity to balance man’s logical and empirical sides with one’s passionate and desiring aspects.

Franklin constructs a streamlined list of virtues that are founded upon the teachings of Socrates, neglecting the need to embrace one’s own natural inclinations toward pleasure. By his efforts to liberate the youth, he creates a morality that requires a system of discipline actually hindering the natural liberty of man. It is this self-cancellation that modernity replicates—displacing an authority in the name of liberty and reason, which in turn creates a new authority where reason is the exclusive authority, thereby never truly attaining liberty, only a new disciplinary system. Franklin’s list of virtues is also a system that posits moral behavior as the means to attain heavenly reward as well as honor and status.

Similar to Socratic Greek culture, Franklin emphasized reason and repressed pleasure, favored intellect over passion. While attempting to implement a disciplinary system of virtue as a means of liberty, he simultaneously creates a paradoxical authoritative system suppressing individuality, which is comparable to other modern systems of economic behavior and morality

This was essentially a proposal for the revival of Socratic morality—the end result of the clash between two types of cultures. The first would be the objective knowledge culture where scientific and technological development, utilization of progress to overpower nature for man’s benefit, and the ideals of logic and reason were revered. The culture that would lose footing was the subjective, personal, emotional culture (Kellner 5). It was a bout between Apollonian and Dionysian ways of life. The new culture did not advocate introspection or an interrogation of feeling, rather it endorsed the concept that no matter how we feel there is a model behavior expounded through the “reasonable man”.

Franklin’s thirteen virtues mirror Socratic ideals, which propose reason as the basis for virtue, and virtue as the path to happiness. The Socratic behavioral standards, which Franklin preferred and tried to promote, favored virtue over vice: temperance and sincerity over ambition; silence, moderation, and tranquility, over passion; frugality, industry, and chastity, over pleasure; and humility over pride (Franklin 72).

The last virtue on his list of thirteen is humility—be like Jesus and Socrates, Franklin suggests. Franklin acknowledges that pride is the most difficult natural passion a man can stifle, and also states that it was his greatest vice. Coincidentally, or possibly due to a manifestation of his true beliefs, it was not originally on the list. Clarence Darrow once remarked that it is easier to fight for your beliefs than to live up to them. It is not that Franklin didn’t live up to his beliefs in virtue, but he admittedly stated that even if he did live a life of humility, it would be to no avail because he would be too proud of the achievement (Franklin 79). In essence, his virtues were less commandments than benchmarks for which men should always strive. They are the elements of human rationality. Embodied, they are the reasonable man in his perfect form, that of which Socrates spoke.

Prior to Socrates’ contributions to Greek social and civic behavior, Greek culture embraced ambition, passion, pleasure and pride. In fact, these human characteristics

produced distinctive contributions to all fields of Greek life (Kellner 2). The means by which these natural human characteristics created rich culture was through the *agon*. The *agon*, which means contest, fostered competition among the Greek citizenry. Nietzsche explains that it was through competition that excellence, or *arête*, was attained (Kellner 7).

It was the practice of these attributes, later considered immoral, and not solely modern virtues, that nourished the fertile soil of civilization. It was the excellent man who embodied dual character. It was the balance of reason and passion, the capability to think logically without repressing desire for pleasures (Nietzsche 10). Nietzsche spoke of Socrates as the “first fencing master of the noble circles of Athens” (Kellner 12). He said this because Socrates discovered a new type of *agon*, one of reason, philosophy, and thought. Socrates did this by appealing to the Greek impulse that was drawn to competition. However, the desires to which Socrates appealed were the same desires he labeled vices.

Ambition, passion, pleasure, and pride were vices to Franklin as well. He separated the good from the evil. And in the face of his belief in liberty, he made suggestions on how to live a proper life by creating a new public virtue—a behavior system with the interest of civic duty and individuality. Benjamin Franklin gives credit to the virtues of frugality and industry for relieving him from his, “remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence” (73). These virtues did not originate with Franklin.

These virtues actually developed as characteristics resulting from Protestantism—specifically Calvinism, and notions of predestination and unconditional election. These concepts essentially dictate that virtue, merit, and faith have no effect on one’s path to heaven. From the beginning of time, these tenets affirm, God has chosen particular people whose spirits are inherently deserving. This idea establishes religious castes: those who are going to heaven, and those who are not, no matter what. However, the only evidence of whether someone has been elected is his or her action here on Earth. The argument is that the elected will behave virtuously due to their inherent selection (Swingewood 25).

Sociologist Max Weber wrote the quintessential text on Protestantism and its effects on economic behavior. In the text, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber theorizes that Protestantism embodied the spirit of modern capitalism by providing ideas and motivation through which social change occurred. Protestantism

rejected luxury and instant gratification on this world. By performing good works, they convinced themselves that they were destined for salvation, which in turn was the means for self-belief (Swingewood 26). This required self-discipline and self-supervision. The emphasis was on the individual. It was necessary for the individual to internalize the values of the Protestant ethic and translate them into social and economic principles (Weber 280). It was understood that, “Frugal populations are necessary maintain freedom only,” (Weber 282).

The Protestant Ethic in Western Europe caused capitalism to emerge in the most complex and successful manner on Earth. Only in Western Europe did the system of capitalism include systematic organization and methodology, rational specialization and expertise, and a social structure in which all aspects of society were modified by frugality and industrious behavior. Weber theorizes that modernity began with the “progressive rationalization of institutions and culture,” where autonomous, “value spheres emerge creating industrial specialization” (328). From Protestantism and Calvinism, the virtues of a divinely elected Christian transformed into a rationality that was insinuated into state, cultural, and personal behavior. Weber concludes that Protestant virtues disenchanting and repressed a Protestant population that not only emphasized individuality and liberation but also laid the foundation for modern capitalism (330). This is another example of the paradox of modernity. Populations who seek freedom through the discourse of liberation are repressed through the discourse of discipline.

By including the virtues of frugality and industry in his list of thirteen, Franklin hoped that a reader who desired success, freedom, and affluence would undergo the strict self-discipline that is required to behave in a socially acceptable manner. Unfortunately, he was at the same time extending the paradoxical shroud of modernity to the 19th century youth he wished to guide.

In *The Way to Wealth*, Franklin elaborates the necessity of not only industry, but also frugality—not only working hard, but also conserving the fruits of one’s labor (Skousen 37). He accentuates the loss of liberty for those who are not frugal by their enslavement to debt. Therefore, he argues that self-discipline and sacrifice may be self-repressive. However, through his repression—that is, the willful abandonment of one’s natural liberty to pleasure—the citizen maintains liberty from banks and creditors.

If, after undergoing self-discipline, the only authority is the self, then the reader assuages his desire for pleasure by spontaneous good will; he is truly liberated because discipline comes from within. This reader would be a prime example of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative, a person whose behavior stems from a sense of duty removed from any consequences and rewards (Kant 30). However, the argument against this position is simple. Virtues exist to guide humanity to a specified outcome. They are separate from the idea of good will. Virtues are behavioral guidelines for the person who wishes to gain material or metaphysical reward. Subscribers to Franklin's virtues are told that by living up to the thirteen standards, they will gain affluence, comfort, education, respect, and liberty. This system is not spontaneous but merely a means to an end.

By subscribing to Franklin's virtues, the reader disciplines his or her self because of external advisement. The external force is the authority. These liberties are earned through behavioral modification. They are not Lockean natural rights. Rather, they are positivist entitlements garnered through sacrifice of natural rights. Thus, the reader becomes a slave to the external discipline, sacrificing liberation for the sake of future liberation through affluence, respect, and education.

Even though Franklin rarely took part in partisan controversy, his hands were not clean of creating it, even unknowingly. In his article "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pain and Pleasure", a young Franklin argued that God was completely benevolent and thus would and could not include vice in his creation, essentially saying that God took a hands off approach to his creation where "good and evil" were man-made. He later burned many copies of the dissertation in fear of misuse and corruption of his ideas (Skousen 12). He was therefore aware of the dangers of published arguments concerning morals, religion, and civics. This is important in the context of Franklin's awareness of the potential paradoxical elements embedded in his list of virtues. He wrote much outside *The Autobiography* about virtue including letters to his friends, enemies, and family members.

Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to his grandson Benny on September 25, 1780. In the letter, he offers advice to his grandson by comparing what he names as, "two sorts of people" (Skousen 218). He uses these examples to instill a passion for education in his grandson. The first type of person took advantage of schooling opportunities to increase

their knowledge. The second type of person either had no opportunity to learn, or was given the opportunity but turned it down. The first type of person now lives comfortably and is virtuous. The second type of person is vicious, indigent, and must work hard to obtain the basics, or will face starvation (Skousen 218). In this letter, Franklin exemplifies the duality of modernity. One can liberate oneself through education, become successful, and be free of the suffering of everyday life. However, to take this road requires much discipline in a moral system developed by the individual's master, be it a teacher, the church, or the state. Critics of modernity and the enlightenment postulate that the discourse of liberation and the discourse of discipline are binary opposites existing inside the concept of modernity (Wagner 74).

Obedience to a disciplinary system as a means to success inhibits one's individuality. Therefore, critics may ask if there is any liberation at all under such a system. The second type of person in Franklin's parable grew up questioning authority and rejecting any form of discipline. Thinking for himself, the second type of person liberated himself from his master and chose not to be educated through the accepted method of society. And through this rejection of discipline, the second type of person now exists in a society that carries burdens of discomfort, dirtiness, overwork and underpay. Critics such as Nietzsche and Weber would say the second type of person is a slave to society.

Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche both understood that the purpose of modernity was increasing individuality. They understood the argument that freedom was a natural right. They also witnessed the effects of the discourse of liberation in science – autonomy in scientific research; economics – the liberation of the market from authoritative state control; and politics – the French and American revolutions. Yet, they were observant enough to spot and dissect the aspects of self-cancellation in modernity (Dallmayr 4). These aspects create the paradox in Franklin's letter to his grandson.

Weber criticized bureaucracy. He said that achievements of the bureaucracies of church and state transform the destiny of human beings by defining success and limiting the ways to reach success (cited in Wagner 64). The more generalized and uniformed modern practices became, the more they formed an "iron cage" which undermined the project. This in effect undermined the ability to even realize modernity as a concept.

Weber stated, “It is if we actually ought to become men who require order and nothing but order, men who grow nervous and cowardly if order falters momentarily, and helpless if uprooted from their adaptation to the order” (cited in Wagner 66).

Nietzsche takes a swing at Christianity’s form of individualism, stating that it undermines itself by canceling morality from one’s social life (Kellner 11). This criticism applies to any moral system where virtues and individuality are together cherished. And it especially applies to Franklin’s advice to his grandson and his thirteen virtues.

The nature of modernity as it is presented in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* can be critiqued through Weberian rationalism, deconstructed through Nietzsche’s proto-Derridian quest for self-destructing paradoxical binaries, and it can be validated by similarities to Socrates’ pursuit of happiness through reason and virtue. However, Bernard Mandeville’s views of the virtue systems created by society’s elite foreground the evolutionary nature of such systems.

A naturalist, Mandeville pegs modernity, reason, and the enlightenment virtues of Western Europe as nothing more than the same authoritarian rule merely masquerading as a solution to corruption. His evolutionary criticism of modernity in *The Fable of Bees* unveils disturbing motivations in creating systems of virtue tied to physical survival of humanity. Mandeville then justifies the system of virtue and vice as a grand illusion necessary for social stability.

Mandeville, a contemporary of Franklin, lived in a time of rampant neo-Socratic reason. Franklin, for example, was an admirer of Socrates. Franklin’s thirteenth virtue states simply to be like Socrates who disregarded self-serving pleasures as vices. As a naturalist, acknowledging that man’s behavior is governed by both his reason and his passion, Mandeville sought to revalidate the classical tradition of passion and pleasure authored in Greece by Epicurus and in Rome by Lucretius and his sole text *De rerum natura*, not as an exclusive Hedonist lifestyle, but to understand the duality of man’s behavior.

Essentially, Mandeville said that to understand actual human motives we must supplement ethics with human impulse. If society continued to view impulse as a vice, Mandeville argued, society would automatically promote self-deception (Hundert 17). Benjamin Franklin’s system of virtues viewed impulsive behavior towards short-term

pleasures as the epitome of vice. Mandeville viewed lists of virtues as unnatural. Judging a person based on a list of thirteen social preferences, which strive to limit man's natural desire for vice, misrepresents the reality of human nature, and adulterates of the scientific study of man's actions.

The Fable of Bees used physiological rather than moral examples to illustrate man's passionate system of behavioral governance. Man is composed of many tiny organs that could compromise the whole body's health. Similarly, man is composed of various passions that will take over man's behavior if triggered. Man shares cognitive capacities of other animals. The ability to create a social hierarchy is not an exclusive human trait. Bees, for example, operate through a hierarchical order of power. They are born into their role in the hive (Hundert 19).

What is unique about man is his intellect, his ability to reroute and redirect others for his own personal gain. Humans naturally act and react by desire seeking what is in their best interest. Intellect suppresses humanity. By implementing a system that suppresses selfishness and desire, we create a civilized society for the benefit of all (Hundert 20). The elite minority who uses intellect to herd and domesticate the majority of the population neutralizes antisocial behavior. Mandeville sees this process as an evolutionary characteristic. It creates nations and states and potentially insures liberty and security.

Furthermore, in the face of the greatest enlightenment philosophers, Mandeville courageously offers an alternative explanation for the proliferation and accumulation of wealth and power. Benjamin Franklin proposes that if readers follow the virtues of sincerity, frugality, and industry, they will reap the benefits of freedom, prosperity, comfort, and influence. Mandeville determines that the benefits desired by the reader will never be attained through acts of virtue. Alternatively, he asserts human ego, hubris, exploitation, and deceit are the true means of public welfare (Hundert 17).

French Enlightenment philosophers Voltaire and Montesquieu echo Mandeville's naturalist theory. Their succinct aphorisms clarify the sociological behavior described in Mandeville's theory of man's inherent tendency to corrupt and repress. In *The Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire writes, "Egoism is the instrument of our preservation,"

(74). In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu concurs with Voltaire, “Greedy citizens contribute more to society than virtuous” (51).

As Weber established, virtuous behavior in Protestant life shaped the behavior in various social spheres in Western Europe. Continuing with his argument that human virtues were incomplete and invalid, Mandeville claims that Christianity contaminated the dynamics of social life. The church would claim virtue to hide its own selfishness and gain the respect of its subordinates. This is an example of humanity’s keenness for deceit. However, this hypocrisy stabilized society and brought peace and order rather than anarchical chaos.

Just as humans tame other animals, the elite minority tames the passions of the savage majority. Mandeville criticizes as absurd the Lockean view that the state was established through rational discussion to protect liberty. Once the state was established amongst Western European modern capitalism, the vice of scrambling for wealth and power began to change. All of the sudden, the accumulation of wealth was a tenant of national prosperity. Rather than curb corruption, the already corrupted state just changed the definition of “corruption”.

It was no longer a virtue to reject wealth and wait for reward in the next life. Virtue, which Mandeville sees as subjective anyhow, cloaks the wise politicians who, when hidden from public view, indulge in vices which allow them to retain power and authority. Mandeville thus argued that morality and virtue are subjective systems used by elites to govern the behavior of the majority for the benefit of all. Benjamin Franklin called Mandeville’s work “entertaining, yet facetious” (Hundert 15). Mandeville would have seen Benjamin Franklin’s list of virtues as a system of control formed by a member of the elite minority to suppress the natural desires, passions, and pleasures of the majority for personal gain and the welfare of the public sphere.

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin is a short, broad account of a few stories in Franklin’s life that helped him form his ethical system of virtue. He encounters various characters, judges them, and describes their virtues and vices, offering examples of moral behavior. His thirteen virtues are given, repeatedly and in italics, throughout the autobiography, framing the text that he says he would practice daily. But he never really

examines how his own life story would differ if he lived his life in the pursuit of the satisfaction of desire rather than social expectations.

His manner in disclosing more information in *The Completed Autobiography* is very different. Where *The Completed Autobiography* is written as a memoir to a general audience, the shorter *Autobiography* is written to the youth. While *Completed* focuses heavily on Franklin's political interactions as a diplomat during the American Revolution, *Autobiography* illustrates his virtues in economics, friendships and social behavior, and public welfare.

Franklin first authored his thirteen virtues and then built an autobiography around them. He sought to replace the many dogmatic rules with a secular list. There was a strong emphasis on neo-Socratic enlightenment virtues: reason, temperance, justice, industry, and sincerity. He thought these civil and moral ideals were the best to secure liberty and advancement in science. If men followed these virtues, they would become vessels of rationality, seeds of modern civilized society, and bricks for the masonry of a new West.

Indeed, Benjamin Franklin wrote his story around the thirteen virtues in order for the reader to understand the benefits of self-sacrifice and discipline. In no way do I think there is any malicious intent to control the youthful audience. The audience can at any moment shut the book. And I'm sure the only people Benjamin Franklin could have possibly cared about were the ones he knew, especially his family. It's a life well experienced to be passed down, wisdom to save others from becoming victims of bad circumstances.

It cannot be said that Benjamin Franklin followed the footsteps of those like his contemporary Thomas Paine, a figurehead for the American enlightenment, who used pulsating rhetoric to demonstrate that liberty from oppressive governments should be at the forefront of the movement of reason. Franklin was not a radical enlightenment thinker who fought for liberty as the means and the end. His virtues alone demonstrate that the person he strived to be was a man of moderation.

In a way, though Franklin mentions Socrates in his virtues, he does not come off as being as devoted to the ideal of reason as was Socrates. His quest for comfort and self-sufficiency, his mind of scientific observation and advancement, and his belief in the

ethics of reciprocity all bring to mind Epicurus. Franklin and Epicurus were also similar in their attitudes towards religion, keeping a distance from the god fearing types of their times. Epicurus is often labeled close to a hedonist, one who lived for maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, but he also warned of the arduous pursuit of love and pleasure, just like Franklin.

However, if we examine not Franklin, but the act of writing *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and his list of virtues, it becomes evident that Franklin developed the book to guide and steer the young. This is in all honesty an effort to have posthumous influence over the public youth. This attitude, that Franklin has much to offer youth from all over world, the attitude which shows how proud he is of being as virtuous as he could be, leaves his whole effort open to criticism. His effort to discipline children in the hope that they would liberate themselves, while simultaneously acknowledging that children who liberate themselves end up losing their liberty, is the essence of the highly criticized paradox of enlightenment rationalization.

In the name of liberty and individuality, Franklin's interpretation of classical virtue it is a failure from the start. His resurrection of Socratic Greece, which the Age of Reason considered the origin and pinnacle of Western virtue and human perfection, only stifled his attempts to bring about a new liberation of Western Europe and America. Liberating through discipline is an impossible task, a self-refuting ideal. Franklin's quest of arriving at moral perfection is an impossible quest. It cannot be performed without automatic compromise of its integrity. Moreover, Franklin's quest for moral perfection only inhibits and suppresses natural inclinations, that which makes us human. Only in a state of natural liberty can natural inclinations manifest without the judgment of an authority. Franklin's solution is to use virtue to gain and retain honor, education, affluence, comfort, and the trust and respect of society. This is a position gained by intellect. Once attained, one may hide one's pursuit of pleasurable vice from the public eye using the trust and respect gained from virtuous behavior. Therefore, the only true liberation Franklin's virtues provide is liberation from the judgment of the majority using virtue as a tool of social deception.

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