Ben Franklin: "The Art of Virtue"

Although Franklin was not a serious philosopher, Americans and Europeans alike regarded him as very wise man. He was a highly trusted adviser to statesmen, as well as to ordinary people.

Moral Perfectionism is a label that fits Franklin's thoughts on virtue. It was common in his day to use the term "perfecting" as a synonym for "improving." To say Franklin was a "perfectionist" in this sense means that he thought it possible for people to improve their moral character—he thought it is something people should do, as well.

Did Franklin think he could be "morally perfect"? Probably not. It is most likely that he regarded moral perfection as an unattainable goal, toward which everyone should continually make progress.

Why be Virtuous?

Assuming we can improve ourselves morally, it seems helpful to understand why we should. Two answers seem most sensible:

1. **Rewards.** Whether we regard virtue as its own reward, or as leading to a separate reward, most people have supposed that virtue's rewards provide obvious reasons why we should be (more) virtuous.

2. **Rectitude.** Franklin uses the phrase "Rectitude of Conduct" to mean simple "rightness" in conduct. Rather than think of virtue as leading to a reward, he says he is interested in becoming virtuous because it will lead him to do what's right, and avoid doing what's wrong.

Franklin appears to be interested in virtues primarily because they are traits of character that lead one to do the right and avoid the wrong habitually. He thinks of a virtuous person as someone who is, in a sense, "programmed" to act rightly. The virtuous person does not have to "stop and think" whether to do the right thing.
Franklin's Catalog of Virtues

An *eclectic* catalog of virtues like Franklin's is one that has no single source or set of reasons behind it. As Franklin says, he came up with his catalog of 13 virtues by surveying others' thoughts on virtue and selecting a set that "at that time occur'd to me as necessary or desirable."

"Necessary or desirable" for what? Franklin doesn't make the answer to this question very clear. Since his guiding purpose in becoming virtuous is "rectitude," he may have thought that his catalog of 13 virtues is the complete set of habits required for always doing the right and avoiding the wrong.

Franklin's Catalog of Virtues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperance</th>
<th>Frugality</th>
<th>Moderation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Cleanliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order</td>
<td>Sincerity</td>
<td>Tranquility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Chastity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Speckled Axe

In explaining his personal struggle with the virtue of "order", Franklin raises an interesting philosophical question: "Is it always better to be morally better?" With his story of "The Speckled Axe," Franklin suggests that there might be good reasons to avoid being *too virtuous*. "Foppery in Morals," as in dress or manners, could make a person subject to ridicule. Also, since a good person might be envied or hated by others because of his exemplary virtue, he should "allow a few faults in himself." At least three (wonderful!) paradoxes arise from this line of thinking:

- How could someone be "too virtuous"? Could one also be "too healthy," or "too happy"? These do not seem to make sense.
- Suppose we agree that it is really best for a person to be slightly less than perfect, because others might envy or hate a perfectly virtuous person. But if they would envy or hate someone morally perfect, why wouldn't they also envy or hate a person who is *even better*—someone slightly less than perfect?
- What does it mean to ask: "Is it always better to be morally better?" It is obviously *morally* better to be morally better, always. Is there some other kind of "better" or goodness to be achieved by being less than morally perfect? If so, should we try to achieve *that* goodness instead of moral goodness or perfection?

Advantages of Virtue

Franklin first recommended cultivating virtues for the sake of right conduct. But he later seems to recommend virtues for the many advantages (rewards) they have brought him.
The Art of Virtue
From Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography

It was about this time that I conceiv'd the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any Fault at anytime; 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 always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a Task of more Difficulty that I had imagined: While my Care was employ'd in guarding against one Fault, I was often surpris'd 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 contriv'd 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 confin'd to Eating and Drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other Pleasure, Appetite, Inclination or Passion, bodily or mental, even to our Avarice and Ambition. I propos'd to myself, for the sake of Clearness, to use rather more names with fewer Ideas annex'd to each, than a few Names with more Ideas; and I included after thirteen

Names of Virtues all that at that time occur'd to me as necessary or desirable, and annex'd to each a short Precept, which fully express'd the Extent I gave to its Meaning. These

NAMES OF VIRTUES with their Precepts were:

1. Temperance.
   Eat not to Dulness. Drink not to Elevation.

2. Silence.
   Speak not but what may benefit others or your self. Avoiding 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: i.e. Waste nothing.

   Lose no Time. Be always employ'd in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary Actions.

7. Sincerity.
   Use no hurtful Deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak; speak accordingly.

   Wrong none, by doing Injuries or omitting the Benefits that are your Duty.

   Avoid Extremes. Forbear resenting Injuries so much as you think they deserve.

10. Cleanliness.
    Tolerate no Uncleaness in Body, Clothes or Habitation.

11. Tranquility.
    Be not disturbed at Trifles, or at Accidents common or unavoidable.

12. Chastity.
    Rarely use Venery but for Health or Offspring; Never to Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of your own or another's Peace or Reputation.

13. Humility.
    Imitate Jesus and Socrates.
My intention being to acquire the Habitude of all these Virtues, I judg'd 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 thro' the thirteen.

I made a little Book in which I allotted a Page for each of the Virtues. I rul'd 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 cross'd these Columns with thirteen red lines, marking the Beginning of each 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 the least Offence against Temperance, leaving the 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 T clear of Spots, I suppos'd the Habit of that Virtue so much strengthen'd and its opposite weaken'd, 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 go thro' a Course complete in Thirteen Weeks, and four Courses in a Year.

---

Form of the Pages

TEMPERANCE

Eat not to Dulness. Drink not to Elevation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sun</th>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tue</th>
<th>Wed</th>
<th>Thu</th>
<th>Fri</th>
<th>Sat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My Scheme of ORDER, gave me the most Trouble, and I found, that tho' 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 observ'd 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 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 Axe 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 turn'd while the Smith
came every now and then from the Wheel to see how the Work went on; and at length would take his Axe as it was without farther Grinding. No, says the Smith, turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by and by; as yet 'tis only speckled. Yes, says the Man; but—I think I like a speckled Axe best.—And I believe this may have been the Case with many who having for want of some such Means as I employ'd 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 Axe was 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 Popery 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.

And it may be well my Posterity should be informed, that to this little Artifice, with the Blessing of God, their Ancestor ow'd the constant Felicity of his Life down to his 79th 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 enjoy'd ought to help his Bearing them with more Resignation. To Temperance he ascribes his long-continu'd 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 which enabled him to be an useful Citizen, and obtain'd for him some Degree of Reputation among the Learned. To Sincerity and Justice the Confidence of his Country, and the honorable Employs it conferr'd upon him. And to the joint Influence of the whole Mass of the Virtues, even in their 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 younger Acquaintance. I hope therefore that some of my Descendants may follow the Example and reap the Benefit.

My List of Virtues contain'd at first but twelve: But a Quaker Friend having kindly inform'd me that I was generally thought proud; that my Pride show'd itself frequently in Conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any Point, but was overbearing and rather insolent; of which he convinc'd me by mentioning several Instances; I determined endeavouring to cure myself if I could of this Vice or Folly among the rest, and I added Humility to my List, giving an extensive Meaning to the Word. 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....

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.