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ARTICLE

Does Liberalism Need Free Will? Augustinianism, Pelagianism, and the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin

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The historiography of liberalism has taken a theological turn. Many scholars now trace the origins of liberal thought to Christian orthodoxy, with its emphasis on the radical equality of humanity under the absolute sovereignty of God. Others trace it to the heresy of Pelagianism, with its emphasis on the radical freedom of humans to choose between good and evil under the rationalistic judgment of God. Focusing on a classic expression of early-modern liberalism, Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, this article questions the theological turn: Franklin's thought, I argue, rejects both Augustinianism and Pelagianism, along with their underlying metaphysical presuppositions concerning human liberty.*

The historiography of liberalism has taken a theological turn. On one track, many scholars have embraced the Nietzschean view that liberalism as such grew from the egalitarian soil of Christian orthodoxy—indeed, that liberalism constitutes little more than a kind of unselfconscious secularization of Christianity or at least Protestantism.[1] Although these scholars have not always drawn Nietzsche's conclusion about the viability of such a tradition after the "death of God," their scholarship points the way to it, and there are certainly indications of a rejuvenated Nietzschean anti-liberalism in the West.[2]

[1]See, e.g., Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York, 2019), 534–42; Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2014); Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, 2012); James Simpson, *Permanent Revolution: The Reformation and the Illiberal Roots of Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2019); Theo Hobson, *God Created Humanism: The Christian Basis of Secular Values* (London, 2017).

[2]See, e.g., Matthew Rose, *A World after Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right* (New Haven, 2021); Dustin Sebell, "An Achilles without a Zeus: Liberalism and the Predicaments of 'Nietzschean Vitalism'," *Political Science Reviewer* 48/1 (2024), 331–56; Graeme Wood, "How Bronze Age Pervert Charmed the Far Right," *The Atlantic*, 3 Aug. 2023, at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/bronze-age-pervert-costin-alamariu/674762.

On a parallel track, however, a number of scholars and public intellectuals have traced the origins of liberalism to the theology of "Pelagianism,"[3] a term that comes from the fifth-century theologian Pelagius, whose teachings were "condemned by Augustine and by almost every orthodox theologian after him."[4] According to the doctrine traditionally ascribed to Pelagius, metaphysical freedom of the will makes all persons fully responsible for their own actions, and indeed for their very moral characters, good or bad. On the Pelagian view, a transcendent power to choose between right and wrong gives every individual human being the chance of becoming perfectly righteous, without God's grace, and hence deserving of either salvation or damnation: "Since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory."[5]

Pelagianism thus poses a challenge to the anthropology of orthodox (i.e., Augustinian) Western Christianity, which holds that our inner freedom is vitiated if not destroyed by our innate sinfulness, absent God's grace, and hence that no one could ever become righteous solely by their own efforts. Accordingly, Pelagius "became the whipping boy of Western theology."[6] On the Augustinian view, in both its Catholic and its Protestant forms, only through the grace of an omnipotent God can sinful individuals be turned toward moral goodness; and only through the grace of an omnipotent God can sinful individuals be saved from eternal damnation.[7] In short, given the sinfulness and weakness of the human will, no one bootstraps their way to virtue, just as no one earns their own salvation. On the Pelagian view, by contrast, every individual is "the master craftsman of his or her own soul,"[8] and thus salvation may be fully merited rather than being freely gifted by a merciful God.

[3]See, e.g., Tzvetan Todorov, *The Inner Enemies of Democracy*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge, 2014), 29–31; Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, 2010), 275; John Gray, "Why the Liberal West Is a Christian Creation," *New Statesman*, 18 Sept. 2019, at www.newstatesman.com/culture/2019/09/why-the-liberal-west-is-a-christian-creation; Adrian Vermeule, "All Human Conflict Is Ultimately Theological," *Church Life Journal*, 26 July 2019, at https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/all-human-conflict-is-ultimately-theological; Josh Hawley, "The Age of Pelagius," *Christianity Today*, 4 June 2019, at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/june-web-only/age-of-pelagius-joshua-hawley.html.

[4]Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, 28. Ali Bonner, *The Myth of Pelagianism* (Oxford, 2018), argues that the position that came to be known as Pelagianism was not really held by the historical Pelagius, notwithstanding Augustine's polemics.

[5]Pelagius, quoted in Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, 106.

[6]Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (Oxford, 2009), 20.

[7]Radicalizing the basic Augustinian teaching, Calvin preached double predestination, the view that grace is irresistible for God's elect and that everyone else is irrevocably damned. Rawls refers to double predestination, "expressed in its rigorous way by St. Augustine and Calvin," as a doctrine "present in St. Thomas and Luther also, and actually only a consequence of predestination itself." John Rawls, "On My Religion," in Rawls, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, ed. Thomas Nagel (Cambridge, 2009), 264. This article takes no position on that question. Among the many denominations of Western Christianity that take Augustine as an authoritative guide, there are, of course, important disagreements (about the scope of free choice, the role of the human will in accepting prevenient grace, the relative importance of faith and works, the efficacy of sacraments, the existence of purgatory, and so on), but the relevant fact for present purposes is their shared anti-Pelagianism.

[8]Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (Oxford, 2013), 88.

Although many others have insisted upon a connection between Pelagianism and liberalism,[9] no one has pursued the thought more doggedly than Eric Nelson. In his recent book *The Theology of Liberalism*, Nelson advances both a striking conceptual claim and a striking historical claim about the Pelagian roots of "dignitarian liberalism," that is, the kind of political thought grounded "in the distinctive value of human autonomy."[10] His conceptual claim is that dignitarian liberalism depends for its coherence on a Pelagian premise that each individual is endowed with a perfectly free will and is thus fully responsible for his or her own moral character. And his historical claim is that the tradition of dignitarian liberalism was identical with Pelagianism until precisely 1971, the year that "John Rawls produced the twentieth century's most significant statement of liberal political philosophy,"[11] a statement that Nelson argues convincingly was motivated by passionate anti-Pelagian sentiments.[12]

With admirable clarity, Nelson maintains that early-modern liberalism—the dignitarian liberalism he associates with thinkers such as Milton, Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau, and Kant—not only resembled Pelagianism but "simply was Pelagianism."[13] His explanation of the tie between Pelagian theology and liberal politics runs as follows:

> Once the religious life is redefined in Pelagian terms as the cultivation of moral virtue throughout a complete life, then what needs protecting is not simply worship and preaching, but an entire sphere of private action. If what has transcendent value is the freely chosen right, then individuals must be allowed to make choices in every facet of their lives. They must be left alone to join the fray and try to win the garland, so long as their actions deprive no one else of the like opportunity.[14]

Rawlsian liberalism, by contrast, is marked by what seems to be a radically "Augustinian" skepticism about moral freedom. In Rawls's view, "we cannot be said to deserve, or be responsible for" our moral characters, since they are merely "the

[9]See note 3 above.

[10]Eric Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (Cambridge, 2019), 21.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., 49–72; see also Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 2019), 5. *The Theology of Liberalism* goes well beyond these claims, ultimately arguing that Rawlsian redistributivism depends on unacknowledged theological premises of its own. This article leaves aside that part of Nelson's study.

[13]Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, xi. Nelson is fully aware of the fact that the liberal tradition is to some extent a retrospective contrivance (see, e.g., Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?", *Political Theory* 42/6 (2014), 682–715; Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2018)). He declares, at the start of his first chapter, "There is no such thing as early-modern liberalism. The concept is anachronistic for the obvious reason that 'liberalism' is a nineteenth-century term, coined to denote a specific political program in post-Revolutionary France. But some anachronisms are indispensable, and this, I believe, is one of them." Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 1.

[14]Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 19. For the sake of argument, I will accept Nelson's characterization of Milton, Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau, and Kant as (a) liberals, (b) Pelagians, and (c) thinkers whose liberalism flowed from their Pelagianism.

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products of some combination of heredity and environment."[15] Rawls suggests that "because the internal contribution to human action is so vanishingly small, it cannot in principle ground *any* claims to merit or desert."[16] To be sure, Rawls does defend a view of retributive justice that presupposes individual responsibility for "bad character."[17] But this introduces a serious incoherence into his theory.[18] And so, according to Nelson, Rawls's dignitarian liberalism constitutes a break with an earlier and more internally consistent kind of dignitarian liberalism, the liberalism that "was, at bottom, the theological position known as Pelagianism."[19]

What exactly is at issue in this Pelagian hypothesis? On one view, very little. Michael Walzer, for instance, insists upon the impossibility of living as a consistent anti-Pelagian, given the human propensity to attribute full moral agency both to ourselves and to others. He gives the example of his own former colleagues at Harvard:

> For years, I lived among the Rawlsians, and I was not surprised but puzzled watching how much they revered and honored Jack Rawls—and thereby denied a basic tenet of his theory … [T]he high intelligence, the seriousness, and the commitment that made *A Theory of Justice* possible (and the humility reflected in the article "A") were all of them, according to the argument of the book, "arbitrary from a moral point of view." These qualities could as easily have filled any other human vessel. If Rawls therefore wasn't entitled to the royalties that the book earned (a point, I assume, that all Rawlsians would accept), then he was also not entitled to the reputation that the book's author earned. But we all revered Jack—how else could we relate to him?[20]

So Walzer raises this "Philistine question": "If it's not possible to live with or act out the anti-Pelagian position, what is the point of the theoretical debates? … [W]hat's at stake?"[21]

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[15]Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 49–50. See, e.g., John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1971), 104, 312.

[16]Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 66, original emphasis.

[17]Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 315.

[18]See Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 67–9. Given that Rawls began his academic career as a believing Christian, Nelson ascribes this incoherence to the lingering influence of Augustine's anthropology, which makes punishments for wrongdoing (unlike rewards for righteousness) fully deserved: "The point is not that the mature Rawls continued to accept the doctrine of original sin, but rather that he continued to write and think *as if he did*. And to the extent that his many disciples have tended to regard human responsibility as quite robust in the retributive realm and highly attenuated in the distributive realm, they are likewise operating under the shadow of a theological claim." Ibid., 68–9, original emphasis.

[19]Ibid., 1–2.

[20]Michael Walzer, "Eric Nelson's Theology of Liberalism: A Comment from the Periphery," *Jerusalem Review of Legal Studies* 26/1 (2022), 202–7, at 205. See also Samuel Moyn, "Rawls and Theodicy," *Commonweal*, 30 Oct. 2019, at www.commonwealmagazine.org/rawls-theodicy.

[21]Walzer, "Eric Nelson's Theology of Liberalism," 207. Whether Walzer's example indicates what he says it does is not entirely clear: one might feel awe before a great mountain, after all, without attributing any moral agency to it, just as one might believe that a lion (or for that matter a lamb) deserves dignified and respectful treatment without regarding it as metaphysically free. Moreover, even if there is a universal propensity to assume moral agency in human beings, there seems also to be a strong propensity in the other direction, that is, a propensity to deny it to ourselves and to others.

But to show the difficulty of adhering rigorously to a given theoretical position is not to demonstrate the practical sterility of that position. (Hence Christians can easily admit the extreme unlikelihood of anyone's living up perfectly to the commandments of Christ while nonetheless insisting that the resurgence of Christianity would have very large social and political effects.) And the theoretical question at stake in this particular debate is one with eminently practical implications: is it reasonable and just to treat individuals as self-making, responsible agents? One's answer to this question must necessarily inform not only one's view of the meritocratic ideal, but also one's understanding of the proper response to crime, poverty, addiction, and so on.

At issue, additionally, is a broader question about the foundation of dignitarian liberalism. According to Nelson, to repeat, early-modern liberalism presupposed a Pelagian doctrine of perfect metaphysical freedom (and hence perfect moral responsibility), and this doctrine made sense of the dignitarian liberal commitment to a broad sphere of freedom. In his view, therefore,

> The cost of accepting this thoroughly anti-Pelagian account of human agency … is prohibitive. If our actions really are completely determined in this way—not just influenced by natural endowments and social advantages beyond our control, but constituted out of nothing beyond them—then it becomes very difficult to explain why we are beings whose autonomy and choices matter in the way that liberals suppose that they do … In order to make sense of liberalism, we need to explain what is uniquely bad about my being directed by an outside force or agency.[22]

If Nelson is right about this, however, then dignitarian liberalism rests on a very slender reed, given the doubts that might be raised about the coherence of the idea of a purely self-determining will,[23] as well as the vast body of social science literature calling attention to the ways in which impersonal forces radically constrain the scope of individual freedom, evidence that has contributed to a recent cross-partisan reaction against the very notions of individual merit, responsibility, and self-help.[24] In the face of these arguments, appeals to a doctrine of pristine inner

[22]Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 124. Nelson concedes that (non-dignitarian) liberalism might be coherently defended on other grounds: "For the line of English utilitarian philosophers that runs from Jeremy Bentham to Henry Sidgwick, for example, civil liberties and religious toleration were to be endorsed because they promoted the greatest happiness of the greatest number. A later tradition would, rather ironically, justify these same liberal institutions instead on the explicitly Augustinian grounds that human beings are so degraded in their nature that they cannot be trusted to wield coercive power over their fellows without inflicting great suffering. This is what Judith Shklar called the 'liberalism of fear.'" And yet, Nelson says, "the Pelagian arguments I have sketched out remained basic to *all* subsequent attempts to ground liberal commitments in the distinctive value of human autonomy" until Rawls. The latter, "unlike *all* of his predecessors in what we might call the 'dignitarian' liberal tradition," was "stridently anti-Pelagian." Ibid., 20–21, added emphasis.

[23]See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Four Great Errors," in Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1982), 499–500.

[24]See, e.g., Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York, 2020); Fredrik deBoer, *The Cult of Smart: How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice*

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freedom might seem willfully obtuse, not to say cruel. So if dignitarian liberalism presupposes "the metaphysical freedom of human beings,"[25] it is tempting to say, so much the worse for dignitarian liberalism; another kind of politics and culture (more Nietzschean, more Marxian, or perhaps more Augustinian) would seem to be in order.

By examining Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, a classic expression of early-modern liberalism,[26] and one that explicitly foregrounds the practical import of "metaphysical reasonings,"[27] this article suggests that the foundations of early-modern liberalism were less grand but more defensible than Nelson suggests. On the one hand, the narrative of the *Autobiography* does constitute a self-conscious critique of the Augustinian piety characteristic of Franklin's Calvinist forebears.[28] While expressing his approval of religion as such, Franklin repeatedly distances himself from the Augustinian orthodoxy in both its Protestant and its Catholic forms.[29] More than this, he suggests that the orthodoxy tends toward a kind of metaphysical fatalism, and he presents his own perspective as the great alternative. In the words of Steven Smith, the *Autobiography* is "a very modern story of self-making and self-becoming."[30] As Mitchell Breitwieser says, "Franklin … presents himself as the author of his life while it was being lived as well as the author of the life in recollection."[31] Indeed, according to Frank Kelleter, Franklin's emphasis on individual self-making has a very harsh corollary: "As an autonomous being, Franklin implies, you can be happy—in fact, you *have* to be happy, because if you're not, you're a self-produced failure."[32] The *Autobiography* therefore offers the most eligible case imaginable for the equating of early-modern liberalism with Pelagianism—and in fact the book offers a

(New York, 2020); Robert M. Sapolsky, *Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will* (New York, 2023); Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York, 2003); Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York, 2019); Sohrab Ahmari, "America Is Nothing More Than a Self-Help Society," *New Statesman*, 5 Aug. 2023, at www.newstatesman.com/the-weekend-essay/2023/08/american-middle-class-self-help-society.

[25]Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 3.

[26]See Carla J. Mulford, *Benjamin Franklin and the Ends of Empire* (Oxford, 2015), 4–7; Kevin Slack, *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue* (Rochester, 2017), 146; Steven Forde, *Locke, Science, and Politics* (Cambridge, 2013), 242; Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven, 2008), 219–20.

[27]Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (1791), in Franklin, *Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York, 1987), 1359. Throughout this article I have modernized Franklin's spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

[28]Augustine "exerted the greatest single influence upon Puritan thought next to that of the Bible itself, and in reality a greater one than did John Calvin." Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1982), 4. In categorizing Calvinism as a branch of Augustinian Christianity, I refer only to its emphasis on original sin. I take no position on whether Augustine would have agreed with Calvin on questions such as double predestination and total depravity. See note 7 above.

[29]See, e.g., Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1350–51, 1359–60, 1382–3, 1399–1400, 1406–10.

[30]Steven B. Smith, *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven, 2016), 130.

[31]Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality* (Cambridge, 1984), 239.

[32]Frank Kelleter, "Franklin and the Enlightenment," in Carla Mulford, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin* (Cambridge, 2008), 77–90, at 87, original emphasis.

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theological creed that might seem to be a paradigmatic example of unacknowledged Pelagianism.[33]

Still, to doubt one position is not necessarily to embrace its polemical adversary, and if Franklin seeks to challenge the Augustinian worldview, he challenges also the Pelagian alternative. That he was aware of this alternative is clear: one of the central questions raised by the *Autobiography* is whether "moral perfection" is attainable through our own efforts.[34] And whether it is possible to "arrive at perfection in this life, as some believe," was a question considered by Franklin's celebrated philosophical society, the Junto.[35] But the *Autobiography* repeatedly stresses the limits of self-making. Owing to its emphasis on the influence of nature, early education, social conditioning, and sheer luck, Franklin's basic metaphysical outlook is incompatible with the Pelagian view that humans are radically free agents. Never once does the book endorse or even mention the idea of an unconditioned free will, not even in the parts devoted to Franklin's metaphysical convictions.[36] Nowhere, in fact, does Franklin present anyone committing a wrong in full knowledge of the act's wrongfulness; the *Autobiography* consistently presents moral transgressions as unfortunate faults or "errata," not willful sins.[37] Accordingly, Franklin moderates his moral indignation, without abstaining from judgments about moral excellence and its opposite, and without ceasing to insist upon the possibility of individual and social improvements.

This article makes three basic points. First, Nelson is right to stress the anti-Augustinian undercurrent running through much of early-modern liberalism, and this is an important corrective to the increasingly widespread view that modern liberalism is essentially a kind of residual Christianity. Second, however, Nelson's historical claim about the Pelagian character of early-modern liberalism is overstated, since it fails to do justice even to the text that seems tailor-made to confirm it. Third, Nelson's conceptual claim about libertarian free will as a necessary foundation for dignitarian liberalism is mistaken, and actually risks undermining liberalism's credibility and humanity. Franklin's liberal politics rest not on any assumption of pure metaphysical freedom but on a claim about the possibilities for individual improvement

[33]Nelson stresses that "'Pelagian' was a term of abuse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, much like 'atheist,' 'Erastian,' and 'democrat.' Virtually no one used these terms to identify him- or herself." Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 4.

[34]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1383.

[35]See Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. L.W. Labaree et al., 43 vols. to date (New Haven, 1959–), 1: 261.

[36]See Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1359–60, 1382, 1396.

[37]For extended discussions of Franklin's emphasis on human imperfection, see Nolan Bennett, *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy* (Oxford, 2019), 27–53; Nicholas Higgins, "Achieving Human Perfection: Benjamin Franklin contra George Whitefield," *Journal of American Studies* 50/1 (2016), 61–80, esp. 69–78. See also Lorraine Smith Pangle, *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore, 2007), 77–8; Houston, *Politics of Improvement*, 36–8; Slack, *Art of Virtue*, 131–2; Smith, *Modernity and Its Discontents*, 122; Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004), 206; Douglas Anderson, *The Unfinished Life of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore, 2012), 199 n. 8; Michael Zuckerman, "Doing Good While Doing Well: Benevolence and Self-Interest in Franklin's *Autobiography*," in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Reappraising Benjamin Franklin* (Newark, 1993), 441–51, at 444, 447.

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(emphatically including moral and intellectual improvement) in a relatively free society.

Below, I first take up the *Autobiography*'s critique of Augustinianism, which constitutes a red thread running through Franklin's "rhetorical masterpiece,"[38] a thread that makes sense of many of its most puzzling passages, especially in the often-neglected and seemingly artless Part III. I then turn to the *Autobiography*'s implicit rejection of Pelagianism, which underlies both Franklin's lack of moral indignation and his stress upon the importance of collective and political (not merely private and individual) improvements.[39] I conclude by evaluating the ambivalence of the liberal view of human freedom, an ambivalence that makes liberalism permanently susceptible to conflicting excesses, and hence conflicting lines of attack. I also offer some critical reflections on the theological turn in the historiography of liberalism.

Franklin's "great and extensive project"

Having given an artful account of his early life and moral reform in Parts I and II of the *Autobiography*, Franklin seems to lose focus in Part III (the longest part of the book), wandering haphazardly from one anecdote to the next. Mitchell Breitwieser has lamented that this part is "more a list than a narrative," a list devoted to "registering numbers of successes and amounts of acclaim" and thereby enhancing Franklin's reputation; it becomes "monotonous."[40] With a similar sense of irritation or disappointment, Ormond Seavey has concluded that "no principle of exclusion permitted him to abridge" Part III.[41] "The imperfect command of dates and details that this portion of his story displays is almost certainly a result of age and poor health, as well as a byproduct of the extraordinary experiences that had filled the intervening decades," Douglas Anderson has suggested.[42] According to Bruce Granger, "Franklin succeeds in structuring only the first part of the *Autobiography* at all tightly."[43] Not surprisingly, then, scholars have paid relatively little attention to Part III.[44]

But the guiding theme of the book's longest part is announced at the very beginning. There, returning to a subject he had mentioned toward the end of Part II,[45] Franklin recalls "*a great and extensive project*" that he had conceived more than fifty years earlier

[38]Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford, "Benjamin Franklin and the American Dream," in Carla Mulford, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin* (Cambridge, 2008), 145–58, at 149.

[39]Houston, *Politics of Improvement*, 109, speaks of Franklin's having practiced "the politics of improvement": "The politics of improvement was based on the belief that humans can shape their world through judgment and choice," but it also "sought to identify limits to agency."

[40]Breitwieser, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin*, 261, 264.

[41]Ormond Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The "Autobiography" and the Life* (University Park, 1988), 90.

[42]Anderson, *Unfinished Life*, 182.

[43]Bruce I. Granger, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Man of Letters* (Ithaca, 1964), 228; see also John Griffith, "The Rhetoric of Franklin's 'Autobiography,'" *Criticism* 13/1 (1971), 77–94, at 81.

[44]An exception is Pangle, *Political Philosophy*, 98–126, which gives sustained attention to Franklin's "benevolent projects" in this part of the book.

[45]See Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1392.

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but apparently abandoned.[46] The project was nothing less than the establishment of a new "sect" devoted to "the good of mankind," complete with its own creed:

> That there is one God who made all things.
> That he governs the world by his providence.
> That he ought to be worshipped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving.
> But that the most acceptable service of God is doing good to man.
> That the soul is immortal.
> And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice either here or hereafter.[47]

This was an audaciously heterodox, un-Augustinian creed in its emphasis on "doing good to man" (over any principle of faith or belief), together with its confident affirmation of divine rewards for virtue, to say nothing of the absence of any reference to Christ, the need for divine grace, or the possibility of eternal damnation. And though he never managed to execute the project, Franklin writes, "I am still of the opinion that it was a practicable scheme, and might have been very useful, by forming a great number of good citizens." He insists, moreover, that its success would be a feasible task for "one man of tolerable abilities," provided he made it his "sole study and business."[48]

Of course, Franklin seems never to have made any one project his "sole study and business." Part III of the *Autobiography*, which covers just the period of his life between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-one, discusses (among other things) his publishing of *Poor Richard's Almanack* and the *Pennsylvania Gazette*; his work as a clerk, postmaster, city councilman, alderman, burgess, and Justice of the Peace; his overhaul of the Philadelphia city watch; his establishment of a fire brigade; his successful advocacy for a defensive militia; his service in that militia; his invention of a new fireplace; his launching of a college; his study of electricity; his lobbying for a new hospital; his efforts to improve the cleanliness and lighting of city streets; his Albany Plan of Union; his quarrels with Pennsylvania's hereditary proprietors; and his participation in the French and Indian War. So while he "recommends concentration," Seavey has remarked, Franklin seems to have "dispersed his own energies widely."[49] And yet his "*great and extensive project*" of moral–theological reform was never quite forgotten, and indeed constitutes a red thread running through Part III, or so I will try to show.

"About the year 1734," Franklin writes shortly after discussing his apparently neglected project, "there arrived among us from Ireland a young Presbyterian preacher named Hemphill, who delivered with a good voice, and apparently extempore, most excellent discourses, which drew together considerable numbers of different persuasions." As Franklin recalls, he himself became one of the new preacher's "constant hearers," being delighted by the fact that his sermons "had little of the dogmatical kind but inculcated strongly the practice of virtue." This emphasis on virtue over

[46]Ibid., 1395, original emphasis.
[47]Ibid., 1395–6.
[48]Ibid., 1397.
[49]Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 83.

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theological orthodoxy, however, meant that Hemphill provoked opposition among "the old clergy," who "arraigned him of heterodoxy before the synod, in order to have him silenced." Remarkably, the typically mild-mannered and conciliatory Franklin now declares that he became Hemphill's "zealous partisan." The battle was finally lost, but Franklin says that he contributed all he could "to raise a party in his favour," adding that after Hemphill's defeat he "quitted the congregation, never joining it after."[50]

Five years later, an even more important ecclesiastical event occurred: the arrival of George Whitefield, the staunchly orthodox Great Awakener, whose pessimistic anthropology proved very appealing to the people of Philadelphia. As Franklin writes,

> The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous and it was a matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admired and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them, by assuring them they were naturally *half beasts and half devils*.[51]

As one scholar has written, "stern dictates about human haplessness were the very marrow of Whitefield's preaching."[52] Apparently forgetting his zealous support for Hemphill, however, Franklin notes that he himself was "employed in printing his [Whitefield's] sermons and journals, etc."[53]

Franklin explains his "surprising" collaboration with Whitefield in two ways.[54] First, he liked him: despite many scurrilous attacks on Whitefield's character, Franklin says that he "never had the least suspicion of his integrity, but am to this day decidedly of opinion that he was in all his conduct a perfectly *honest man*."[55] Second, though, Franklin stresses that Whitefield's popular influence was entirely dependent on his oratory. In fact Franklin admits that he himself once succumbed to this oratory, and despite his resolutions "emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all."[56] Soon after, he describes a rapt crowd stretching as far as the eye could see and listening to Whitefield in "the most exact silence."[57] But Whitefield's published works contributed nothing to his reputation. On the contrary, Franklin says,

[50]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1399–1400. On Franklin's deep personal investment in the Hemphill affair see Thomas S. Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life of a Founding Father* (New Haven, 2017), 110–18.

[51]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1406, original emphasis.

[52]Peter Charles Hoffer, *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend Whitefield: Enlightenment, Revival, and the Power of the Printed Word* (Baltimore, 2011), 58.

[53]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1408.

[54]Melvin H. Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park, 1975), 4.

[55]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1408, original emphasis. Whitefield's being "perfectly *honest*" would seem to belie his own emphasis on humanity's sinfulness ("*half beasts and half devils*"). See also Franklin's reference to Whitefield's "benevolent heart." Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1407.

[56]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1407.

[57]Ibid., 1409. Lerner writes, "Franklin is interested in almost every aspect of Whitefield's speech and speaking other than his subject. I take this to be his considered judgment of the subject's relative importance and utility." Ralph Lerner, *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic* (Ithaca, 1987), 57. While I agree that Franklin indicates his low view of the utility of Whitefield's message, I think he regards the subject matter as extremely important.

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critics "attacked his writings violently, and with so much appearance of reason as to diminish the number of his votaries, and prevent their increase." Indeed, "if he had never written anything, he would have left behind him a *much more* numerous and important sect."[58] Thus Franklin indicates that his publishing of Whitefield was a double-edged sword. If it spread Whitefield's message in the short run, it limited and even diminished its influence in the long run.[59]

Nor was this Franklin's only line of counterattack. After all, his core anthropological claim in the *Autobiography* itself—his claim that humanity is afflicted not by innate sinfulness but by a combination of mistaken ideas and bad habits, and thus that we can advance toward "happiness" under our own steam[60]—amounts to a repudiation of the central claim of Augustinian Christianity.[61] Accordingly, while Franklin stresses that he forged a friendship with Whitefield that was "sincere on both sides," he stresses also that the friendship was merely "civil," and that there was "no religious connection" between them.[62] In a neat summation of his distance from Christian orthodoxy, he writes: "One of our common acquaintance jocosely remarked, knowing it to be the custom of the saints, when they received any favour, to shift the burthen of the obligation from off their own shoulders, and place it in heaven, I [Franklin] had contrived to fix it on earth."[63]

Indeed, Franklin's "*great and extensive project*"—his project of supplanting the Augustinian worldview promulgated by Whitefield—helps explain many of the most puzzling passages in Part III of the *Autobiography*. Consider, for example, the notorious story concerning Franklin's meeting with a group of Ohio Indians at a diplomatic summit in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1753. According to Franklin, having struck a deal with Pennsylvania's agents, the Indians excused a night of drunken violence—they "formed a scene the most resembling our ideas of hell that could well be imagined," he says—by laying responsibility at the feet of a mysterious divinity. As Franklin writes, the next morning an Indian orator

> acknowledged the fault, but laid it upon the rum; and then endeavoured to excuse the rum, by saying, "*The great Spirit who made all things made everything for some use, and whatever use he designed anything for, that use it should always be put to. Now when he made rum, he said*, LET THIS BE FOR INDIANS TO GET DRUNK WITH. *And it must be so.*"[64]

[58] Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1409–10, added emphasis.

[59] Franklin depicts himself as Whitefield's inverse: "a bad speaker," but an author talented enough to get himself read even by people who bought "scarce any other books." Ibid., 1393, 1397.

[60] Ibid., 1308, 1391, 1429.

[61] In a November 1765 letter to his wife, Franklin ridiculed the idea that God "planned Adam's fall, and the damnation of mankind." Franklin, *Papers*, 12: 360. A similar attitude can be seen in his May 1762 letter to David Hume. Ibid., 10: 82–4.

[62] Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1408.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1422, original emphasis.

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Franklin then adds, in a coda that has appalled readers over many generations,[65] "And indeed if it be the design of Providence to extirpate these savages in order to make room for cultivators of the earth, it seems not improbable that rum may be the appointed means."[66]

That alcohol was a serious problem among many tribes—one introduced and exploited by the British Empire—is corroborated by the Carlisle treaty itself, which was printed for public perusal by Franklin, and which includes the following grievance:

> Your traders now bring scarce anything but rum and flour … The rum ruins us. We beg you would prevent its coming in such quantities by regulating the traders … We desire it may be forbidden, and none sold in the Indian country … These wicked whiskey sellers, when they have once got the Indians in liquor, make them sell their very clothes from their backs.[67]

But Franklin, far from despising "savages,"[68] was famously one of the foremost American defenders of Indian society, even at the risk of his own life.[69] His personal intervention against the so-called Paxton Boys, the Pennsylvania frontiersmen who slaughtered twenty Conestoga Indians in 1763, is among the subjects mentioned in his notes for the unfinished *Autobiography*: he refers simply to the "Paxton Murders."[70]

Besides, by the time Franklin tells the story about the drunken Indians in the *Autobiography*, he has repeatedly drawn attention to the pervasive drunkenness of Europeans and Americans. On his first boat journey to Philadelphia, he says, "a drunken Dutchman, who was a passenger too, fell overboard."[71] Later, he found that his boyhood friend John Collins "had acquired a habit of sotting with brandy." Collins's

[65]See, e.g., D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, 1923), 50; Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, 1967), 42; Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 85; James Campbell, *Recovering Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service* (Chicago, 1999), 240–41; Hoffer, *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend Whitefield*, 81; Nathan R. Kozuskanich, *Benjamin Franklin: American Founder, Atlantic Citizen* (New York, 2015), 81; John Paul Rollert, "Second Founding," *The Point*, 30 Nov. 2015, at https://thepointmag.com/criticism/second-founding.

[66]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1422.

[67]Susan Kalter, ed., *Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania, and the First Nations: The Treaties of 1736–62* (Urbana, 2006), 170. As Schrad remarks, "Movements for temperance, abstinence, and prohibition by Native Americans were not limited to a handful of leaders … They were broad-based, indigenous movements." Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Smashing the Liquor Machine: A Global History of Prohibition* (New York, 2021), 275.

[68]In his 1783–4 "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America," Franklin begins with a disclaimer: "Savages we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs." Franklin, *Papers*, 41: 416–17. He goes on to suggest that the Indians have the better of the dispute.

[69]See Mulford, *Ends of Empire*, 175, 327–30; Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life*, 196–7; Houston, *Politics of Improvement*, 102–4; Kerry S. Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods* (Urbana, 1999), 184–5; Kalter, *First Nations*, 33, 36. For examples of Franklin's expressions of admiration for Indians, and of outrage at unprovoked violence committed against them, see Franklin, *Papers*, 4: 481, 17: 381–2, 19: 7, 19: 197, 37: 587, 41: 412–23. Several passages in the *Autobiography* likewise attest to a sense of respect and kinship (see Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1440–41, 1448; Anderson, *Unfinished Life*, 206 n. 13).

[70]*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (Knoxville, 1981) (hereafter Lemay and Zall, *Genetic Text*), 205.

[71]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1326.

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"dramming" soon led to a rupture in their friendship: "when a little intoxicated he was very fractious."[72] Then, while Franklin was working in a London printing house, his coworkers turned out to be "great guzzlers of beer": "My companion at the press drank every day a pint before breakfast, a pint at breakfast with his bread and cheese, a pint between breakfast and dinner, a pint at dinner, a pint in the afternoon about six o'clock, and another when he had done his day's work." The costs of this "muddling liquor" soaked up his colleagues' wages. "And thus," Franklin writes (with a turn of phrase that anticipates the scene at Carlisle), "these poor devils keep themselves always under."[73]

Things were no better in America. Franklin's first business partner, Hugh Meredith, "was often seen drunk in the streets, and playing at low games in alehouses, much to our discredit."[74] Shortly after, Franklin noticed that the inefficacy of the Philadelphia city watch was due largely to the fact that the watchmen spent their nights "tippling."[75] Then, in an effort to secure cannons for the defense of Pennsylvania, Franklin was able to use drink to mollify George Clinton, the governor of New York: "He at first refused us peremptorily, but at a dinner with his council where there was great drinking of Madeira wine, as the custom at that place then was, he softened by degrees, and said he would lend us six. After a few more bumpers he advanced to ten. And at length he very good-naturedly conceded eighteen."[76] Among the supplies procured for the feckless British officers in the French and Indian War, Franklin makes clear, were large quantities of wine and "Jamaica spirits."[77] And when Captain Denny became governor of Pennsylvania, wine played a crucial part in his clumsy attempts to try to bribe Franklin at a dinner party: "The drinkers, finding we did not return immediately to the table, sent us a decanter of Madeira, which the governor made liberal use of, and in proportion became more profuse of his solicitations and promises."[78] As Douglas Anderson writes, "Temperance heads Franklin's list of virtues, in part, because alcohol pervades his world."[79]

Failure to consider the Carlisle story in its literary context—as part of the unfolding of Franklin's "*great and extensive project*," and as just one in a long chain of stories centering on the problem of drunkenness in eighteenth-century England and America—has led many readers to chastise Franklin for unthinkingly "othering" the Indians. D. H. Lawrence, for example, whom Mitchell Breitwieser calls "the best reader of the *Autobiography*,"[80] denounced Franklin's "specious little equation in providential mathematics: Rum + Savage = 0."[81] It seems more plausible to conclude that the "savages" of Carlisle function as rhetorically safe stand-ins for a theological target that was

[72]Ibid., 1336–7.
[73]Ibid., 1348.
[74]Ibid., 1366.
[75]Ibid., 1404.
[76]Ibid., 1412.
[77]Ibid., 1439.
[78]Ibid., 1456.
[79]Anderson, *Unfinished Life*, 169–70.
[80]Breitwieser, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin*, 286.
[81]Lawrence, *Studies*, 50.

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precisely not the Other. (In fact the drunken Dutchman who fell overboard during Franklin's first voyage to Philadelphia is said to have been carrying a prized copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.)[82] Rather than raising a serious question about whether "the design of Providence" is "to extirpate these savages," the Carlisle story makes a larger point about the attitude of fatalistic acquiescence to the will of a "*great Spirit who made all things*."[83]

The politics of improvement

The next story in Part III illustrates the liberal alternative. "In 1751," Franklin writes in an apparently abrupt shift of topics that scrambles the chronology by leaping back two years, "Dr. Thomas Bond, a particular friend of mine, conceived the idea of establishing a hospital in Philadelphia for the reception and cure of poor sick persons." Instead of resigning himself to the inevitability of mundane ills such as poverty and sickness, Bond was "zealous and active" in working to establish the hospital—a "very beneficent design."[84] By the same token, whereas the Carlisle orator had attempted "to excuse the rum" by appealing to the providential order, Franklin now says that he "excused" himself only insofar as he "made some use of cunning" in helping to raise funds for the hospital.[85] And he now declares, "I do not remember *any* of my political maneuvers the success of which gave me at the time more pleasure,"[86] a remarkable statement for someone whose political maneuvers in France had been crucial to America's victory in the War of Independence.[87]

"It was about this time," Franklin continues, "that another projector, the Reverend Gilbert Tennent, came to me with a request that I would assist him in procuring a subscription for a new meeting-house. It was to be for the use of a congregation he had gathered among the Presbyterians."[88] Earlier, Franklin had claimed that when "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."[89] Now, however, Franklin says that when he was approached by Tennent, he "absolutely refused." Moreover, when Tennent "then desired I would furnish him with a list of the names of persons I knew by experience to be generous and public-spirited," Franklin "refused also to give such a list."[90] Of course, when Tennent asked for a few words of

[82]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1326.

[83]Ibid., 1422. The Carlisle story and Franklin's essay "Sidi Mehmet on the Slave Trade" were written by Franklin in the same period. Lemay and Zall, *Genetic Text*, xxi–xxii. Very much like the Carlisle story, "Sidi Mehmet" satirizes a Christian teaching under the guise of a speech by a foreigner—in this case, an Algerian Muslim defending slavery (indeed, the enslavement of European Christians).

[84]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1422.

[85]Ibid., 1424.

[86]Ibid., added emphasis.

[87]The beginning of Part III is dated "August 1788," with Franklin writing "at home." Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1395. Earlier, the *Autobiography* refers in passing to the "affairs of the Revolution" (1372) and to Franklin's living in Passy, France (1379).

[88]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1424.

[89]Ibid., 1382–3.

[90]Ibid., 1424.

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fundraising advice, Franklin obliged; but this is the only occasion in the *Autobiography* where he shows himself declining—in fact declining twice—to contribute personally to a project in Philadelphia.

Now Franklin's explanation for his uncharacteristic double refusal is perfectly innocuous: he was simply unwilling to make himself "disagreeable" to his fellow citizens "by too frequently soliciting their contributions" and harassing them with requests from too many "other beggars."[91] But Franklin has just made clear that when Thomas Bond had commented on his amazing ubiquity in public-spirited projects, he had taken it as a compliment; and so he had eagerly and tirelessly advanced the hospital project. Indeed, it seems doubtful that Bond's request actually predated Tennent's: Franklin's "Appeal for the Hospital" was published in August 1751, and he explicitly dates Bond's request to that year, but construction of Tennent's church apparently began much earlier, in May 1750.[92] Even stipulating that the church request did come after the hospital request, though, the question remains: why did Franklin draw the line there, having unhesitatingly supported so many other public-spirited projects (a library, a reformed city watch, a fire brigade, a militia, an academy, a philosophical society, a hospital)?[93]

Tennent's congregation, Franklin notes, had been "disciples of Mr. Whitefield."[94] Indeed, Whitefield himself labeled Tennent "a Son of Thunder."[95] "Hellfire Tennent," as he was known,[96] fiercely opposed unorthodox ministers such as Franklin's *beau idéal* of a preacher, Hemphill.[97] He taught that sinners are justified by faith alone, faith infused by the mysterious grace of God "without any mixture of our obedience to the moral law joined with it."[98] He "preached 'like a boatswain of a ship, calling the sailors to come to prayer and be damned,' said one witness."[99] In short, he was a purveyor of the most fatalistic variety of Augustinianism. After being struck by lightning, he "attributed the strike to God's sovereign rule over his life."[100]

[91] Ibid.

[92] "[I]n 1750 the new church building was completed … The corner-stone was laid on May 17, 1750." Alexander Mackie, "The Presbyterian Churches of Old Philadelphia," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43/1 (1953), 217–29, at 221. Franklin gives no date for Tennent's request.

[93] The snubbing of Tennent is generally overlooked. An exception is Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life*, 170: "In spite of his victories with the academy and the hospital, even Franklin had limits with regard to raising money. He drew a line, for example, at helping Reverend Gilbert Tennent procure funds for a new Presbyterian church building." It might be said that Franklin also shows himself refusing to contribute to George Whitefield's charitable project for establishing an orphanage in Georgia. Franklin finally succumbed to Whitefield's hypnotic rhetoric, however, against his better judgment. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1407–8.

[94] Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1424.

[95] Houston, *Politics of Improvement*, 71.

[96] Mackie, "Old Philadelphia," 221.

[97] Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life*, 134.

[98] Gilbert Tennent, *Sermon upon Justification* (Philadelphia, 1741), 4.

[99] H. W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2002), 145.

[100] Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life*, 173. As Thuesen, *Predestination*, 88, notes, "Lightning had always been the perfect image of an undomesticated providence." Franklin's *Autobiography* speaks of his "improvements and discoveries in the electric branch of natural philosophy" (1430), including the "infinite pleasure" he took in his famous kite experiment (1455). On the religious uproar produced by Franklin's lightning rods, see Thuesen, *Predestination*, 88–9.

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Franklin's disgust with this theology, not a sudden onset of uneasiness about imposing too much on his fellow citizens, presumably explains why he refused to be enlisted in this particular project. And "disgust" is not too strong a word: in Part II, Franklin had criticized an unnamed preacher whose "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 … [I] was *disgusted*, and attended his preaching no more."[101]

Thus, having mentioned his snubbing of Tennent, Franklin discusses several of his own mundane projects, undertaken without any apparent qualms about making himself "disagreeable" to his neighbors. Indeed, in the paragraph directly following his refusal of Tennent, Franklin details the proposals he made for improving the cleanliness of city streets through a system of sweeping, raking, and clearance, since in London he had "observed that the streets when dry were never swept and the light dust carried away, but it was suffered to accumulate till wet weather reduced it to mud."[102] He records these proposals at length, defends their practicability, and insists on the "weight and consequence" of such things, against those who "think these trifling matters not worth minding."[103]

According to a letter (from his friend Benjamin Vaughan) inserted by Franklin at the beginning of Part II, Franklin's life story—with its many apparently scattered, small-scale reform projects—will help prove "that man is not even at present a vicious and detestable animal," and "that good management may greatly amend him."[104] In other words, Franklin's life as he presents it in the *Autobiography* is a gentle challenge to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin (or the idea that we are "naturally *half beasts and half devils*"). And so, in a sense, Franklin really did make the promulgation of his heterodox sect—the "*great and extensive project*"—his "sole study and business," notwithstanding his apparently scattershot mode of activity.[105]

[101]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1383, added emphasis. Buxbaum notes that the "increasing strength and influence" of Presbyterianism "were a source of fear and dismay" to Franklin: "Presbyterian churches were multiplying everywhere, and Presbyterians were either in charge of or prominent in most northern colonial colleges. Harvard, Yale, and the College of New Jersey (Princeton) were theirs. Queen's College (Rutgers), though not Presbyterian, was Dutch Calvinist, and King's College (Columbia) was embroiled in a bitter contest between Anglican and Presbyterian forces for control. A similar struggle in his own College of Pennsylvania (later the University of Pennsylvania) was especially grievous, and to make matters worse he feared Presbyterians might take over the institution." Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 2–3.

[102]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1426.

[103]Ibid., 1428–9. Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 90, having declared that "Franklin gets bogged down" by trivial details in Part III, complains: "And instead of hastening his account toward completion, he apparently went back … and amplified what he had just written … [He] inserted eleven pages on the Pennsylvania Hospital, paving the city, and sweeping the streets, some time between December 1788 and May 1789."

[104]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1378.

[105]On Franklin's influence on the character of American religion, see Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life*, 7–8. Cf. Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 82, who remarks that the "*great and extensive project*" was "so much more grandiose even than Franklin's real accomplishments."

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To be sure, Franklin's emphasis on his friendship with Whitefield (together with the affectionate treatment of his Puritan forebears early in the *Autobiography*, and the fact that he did after all offer Tennent some friendly advice) indicates the modest, unhysterical character of his theological critique. Indicative of his larger cultural project, however, is his reflection at the very end of Part III concerning his boat's narrow escape from shipwreck on a voyage to England in 1757. This "deliverance" (as he calls it) impressed him strongly "with the utility of lighthouses," and made him "resolve to encourage the building more of them in America."[106] The opposite attitude is represented by a "maiden lady" in London who does nothing but sit in her garret room, repenting her "vain thoughts" in prayerful contemplation.[107]

The Augustinian alternative was especially consequential in colonial America when towns were rife with infectious diseases, including the smallpox that killed Franklin's only legitimate son, Francis Folger Franklin. Early on in Part III, Franklin writes, "In 1736 I lost one of my sons, a fine boy of four years old, by the smallpox, taken in the common way. I long regretted bitterly and still regret that I had not given it to him by inoculation."[108] As Peter Thuesen notes, many of Franklin's contemporaries rejected inoculation on theological grounds, holding "that persons should not seek to prolong the divinely predetermined lengths of their lives." If some tried to reconcile pious submission to the will of God with support for medical intervention, this was in large part due to what Thuesen describes as the "emerging Enlightenment mind-set"; they were "unwittingly abetting a cultural transformation."[109] Franklin, I think, intended his *Autobiography* to accelerate that process.[110]

The limits of self-making

Of course, the theological credo endorsed by Franklin as the core of his "*great and extensive project*," with its confident affirmation that "God will certainly reward

[106]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1464; see also 1426, on the lamps he pioneered in Philadelphia, which allowed for "enlightening all the city." In a letter to his wife upon arriving safely in England in 1757, Franklin wrote: "The bell ringing for church, we went thither immediately, and with hearts full of gratitude, returned sincere thanks to God for the mercies we had received: were I a Roman Catholic, perhaps I should on this occasion vow to build a chapel to some saint; but as I am not, if I were to vow at all, it should be to build a *lighthouse*." Franklin, *Papers*, 7: 243, original emphasis.

[107]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1350.

[108]Ibid., 1402.

[109]Thuesen, *Predestination*, 87–8.

[110]Any idea of a simple opposition between "Enlightenment" and orthodoxy here is complicated by the fact that Franklin's own decidedly heterodox brother James had once opposed the mandating of smallpox inoculations in Boston, a measure advocated by the great Puritan minister Cotton Mather, who tried to reconcile "the two worlds of Calvinism and Enlightenment." Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*, 24. Franklin leaves this story out of the *Autobiography*. But he does present Mather's *Essays to Do Good* as a book that "perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life." Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1317. My suggestion is that it was not the Augustinian part of Mather's thought that influenced Franklin, except insofar as he reacted against it. See, e.g., Mather's attacks upon "criminal self-love," "merit-mongers," and "the evil of sin" that "brings all our trouble." Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay upon the Good* (1710), ed. David Levin (Cambridge, 1966), 23, 31, 50.

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virtue and punish vice,"[111] might seem to be a perfect example of unacknowledged Pelagianism, and thus to confirm Nelson's historical claim about the theological foundations of early-modern liberalism. Indeed Franklin, whose politics were more unambiguously liberal than any of Nelson's exemplary early-modern liberals (Milton, Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau, and Kant), and whose *Autobiography* puts so much stress on the possibility of self-making, would seem to be the ideal candidate for corroborating the Pelagian hypothesis. After all, the most famous part of the *Autobiography* is Franklin's discussion of his "bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection,"[112] a project redolent of Pelagian optimism if ever there was one.

Yet if the *Autobiography* acknowledges the possibility of self-making, it also acknowledges the obdurate limits of that possibility. At the beginning of Part I, for example, Franklin stresses how much of his character he received as an unmerited gift. He begins by underlining the similarity between himself and his multitalented English uncle Thomas, who died four years to the day before Franklin was born: "The account we received of his life and character from some old people at Ecton I remember struck you [BF's son William] as something extraordinary from its similarity to what you know of mine. Had he died on the same day, you said one might have supposed a transmigration."[113] Men on both sides of his family, he points out, had literary and political inclinations that closely prefigured his own.[114] Shortly after, he indicates that he owed his remarkable vigor at least partly to his parents, Josiah and Abiah Franklin, each of whom had "an excellent constitution."[115] This apparent advantage was evident at a very early age, when—in an instance that "shows an early projecting public spirit, though not then justly conducted"—he led a group of local boys in the construction of a fishing wharf, using pilfered stones.[116] And Franklin's native intelligence was also obvious at the outset. Unlike his elder brothers, Franklin "was put to the grammar school [i.e., a school at which Latin was taught] at eight years of age." Given his "early readiness in learning to read"—"I do not remember when I could not read," he says—his father's friends were all of the opinion "that I should certainly make a good scholar"; indeed he rapidly ascended to the top of the class.[117]

By the same token, Franklin highlights the formative influence of his earliest upbringing. The fact that his father paid so little attention to culinary matters, to take a small but revealing example, meant that the young Franklin "was brought up in such a perfect inattention to those matters as to be quite indifferent what kind of food was set before me." This was, he says, a great "convenience to me in travelling, where my companions have been sometimes very unhappy for want of a suitable gratification of their more delicate, because better instructed, tastes."[118] His father also encouraged him

[111] Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1396.
[112] Ibid., 1383.
[113] Ibid., 1310.
[114] Ibid., 1310–11, 1312–13.
[115] Ibid., 1315.
[116] Ibid., 1314.
[117] Ibid., 1313.
[118] Ibid., 1315.

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to appreciate the virtue of industry, taking him to watch "joiners, bricklayers, turners, braziers, etc., at their work."[119] Most importantly, though, he taught him the crucial lesson—in the wake of the stone-pilfering incident—that "nothing was useful which was not honest."[120] Indeed, according to Franklin, his father gave him a steady supply of ethical instruction:

> At his table he liked to have, as often as he could, some sensible friend or neighbour to converse with, and always took care to start some ingenious or useful topic for discourse, which might tend to improve the minds of his children. By this means he turned our attention to what was good, just, and prudent in the conduct of life.[121]

According to Franklin, moreover, it was his domineering brother James who unwittingly inculcated in him "that aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me through my whole life."[122] So the seeds of the core moral virtues were planted at a very early age.[123]

At the same time, Franklin draws attention to the powerful influence of the broader society on his particular cast of mind. It was in order to secure his credit in Quaker-dominated Philadelphia, he stresses, that he "took care not only to be in *reality* industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *appearances* to the contrary."[124] In England, where the tone was set by a leisured aristocracy, such habits would have been obstacles to social esteem; had Franklin's character been formed there, he might well have had more in common with the "poor devils" he met in London as a young man.[125] Of course,

[119]Ibid., 1316.

[120]Ibid., 1314.

[121]Ibid., 1315. Later, Franklin presents the detrimental effects of a very different kind of education on the quarrelsome Pennsylvania governor Robert Hunter Morris: "He had some reason for loving to dispute … He had been brought up to it from a boy, his father (as I have heard) accustoming his children to dispute with one another for his diversion while sitting at table after dinner. But I think the practice was not wise, for in the course of my observation, these disputing, contradicting, and confuting people are generally unfortunate in their affairs." Ibid., 1432.

[122]Ibid., 1324 n.

[123]As Ketcham puts it, Franklin's "physical strength, glandular balance, nerve patterns, and other endowments"—preconditions of "his boundless energy"—"were his by nature's bounty"; but the "*direction* of them into fields of usefulness and their *organization* into patterns of accomplishment were from nurture, not nature." Ralph L. Ketcham, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1966), 53, original emphasis. The image of Franklin as a thoroughly self-made man was encouraged in the early nineteenth century by the editorial judgments of Franklin's grandson William Temple Franklin: "Franklin in his *Autobiography* had played down the suggestion that he was the architect of his own fortune. He had written simply that he had 'emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world.' His grandson Temple, however, in his edition of Franklin's *Memoirs*, first published in 1817–18, wanted to emphasize the great man's self-made character. So his edition read: 'From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born … I have raised myself to a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in the world.' '*Raised myself*'! That was quite a difference." Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 241, original emphasis.

[124]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1369, original emphasis. Cf. Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 56: "Franklin's rise is never affected, in the *Autobiography*, by the presence of society as a whole. Instead, that world appears to be passive and at his disposal."

[125]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1348.

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in some sense Franklin was free to offend the Quaker order, just as he had offended the Puritan order in Boston with his "indiscreet disputations about religion."[126] Many others adopted different habits in Philadelphia: the printer David Harry, for instance, was "very proud, dressed like a gentleman, lived expensively, took much diversion and pleasure abroad, ran in debt, and neglected his business, upon which all business left him."[127] But given Franklin's native intelligence, and his urgent need for credit, he was not simply free to follow in Harry's stumbling footsteps.

Nor, finally, does Franklin ignore the role of chance in his moral formation. After all, if it is true that "procuring wealth" is the crucial means of "securing virtue,"[128] then Franklin's finding himself in a city that had only two printers, both "poorly qualified for their business,"[129] was a stroke of tremendous moral luck. Had he been brought up to a different trade,[130] or had he decided to become a poet,[131] or had he been arrested as a runaway servant before making it to Philadelphia,[132] he might well have ended up with a less edifying character. Nor was his success in Philadelphia simply his own doing: he owed a great deal, he makes clear, to the encouragement, advice, and material assistance of others,[133] to say nothing of his happening to live in an opportunely "rising country."[134]

To be sure, Franklin suggests that the most important education he received was the one he formulated for himself, when he undertook his great project of self-reformation. As he writes, when he first "conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection," he "wished to live without committing any fault at any time."[135] But he "never arrived" at that goal, he goes on to say, and indeed "fell far short of it."[136]

Nor does he give any indication that he might have attained moral perfection, had he managed his life differently. He stresses, for instance, that he found himself absolutely "incorrigible" with respect to the virtue of order, in large part because he "had not been early accustomed to it."[137] Nor could he make much progress in attaining humility; even the polite feigning of humility, he says, required "some violence" to his

[126]Ibid., 1325.

[127]Ibid., 1369.

[128]Ibid., 1397. This is not, of course, equivalent to a claim that wealth guarantees virtue. At the Constitutional Convention Franklin observed, "Some of the greatest rogues he was ever acquainted with, were the richest rogues." Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 3 vols. (New Haven, 1911), 2: 249. Moreover, Franklin's aphoristic claim that "*it is hard for an empty sack to stand upright*" (*Autobiography*, 1397, original emphasis) carries the anti-Pelagian implication that crimes committed by the poor should be judged somewhat less harshly than crimes committed by the rich.

[129]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1331.

[130]Ibid., 1317.

[131]Ibid., 1318.

[132]Ibid., 1327.

[133]Ibid., 1344, 1357, 1365–6, 1366–7, 1368.

[134]Ibid., 1378.

[135]Ibid., 1383–4.

[136]Ibid., 1391.

[137]Ibid.

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"natural inclination."[138,139] And he points to a still more fundamental difficulty when he says that, in launching his program of moral self-reformation, "I knew, *or thought I knew*, what was right and wrong."[140] The possibility of moral perfection presupposes the (humanly unavailable) existence of perfect moral knowledge, not just in the abstract but in every particular case.

Apparently because he assumes that a wise and beneficent God would have to be bound by considerations of elementary reasonableness and fair play, then, Franklin evinces no anxiety that his many wrongs (whether born of general delusions or of particular mistakes) might bring forth everlasting hellfire. On the contrary, his attitude toward his own moral failings is one of calm resignation:

> 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 endeavour made 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 endeavour, and is tolerable while it continues fair and legible.[141]

The torments of hell, presumably, are reserved for a tiny handful of exceptionally malicious cases, those who do evil in full knowledge of its evil.

Or would Franklin grant even that possibility? As many commentators have noted, in the *Autobiography* he depicts himself as being free from ongoing moral indignation.[142] And this easygoing attitude makes sense, given the basic premises of Franklin's moral teaching: if vice is a recipe for unhappiness,[143] "the nature of man alone considered,"[144] so that "a vicious man could not properly be called a man of sense,"[145] then no one freely chooses to do evil in full view of what they are choosing. Understood this way, vice cannot reasonably be the object of guilt-ridden remorse, on the one hand, or of retributive punishment, on the other. Thus in glossing the virtue of "moderation,"

[138]Ibid., 1393; Thus he implicitly raises the question of the extent to which other people might be hindered, by their own upbringings and natural inclinations, from acquiring other virtues.

[139]Vaughan's letter to Franklin says that "a reasonable course in life" is "in many a man's private power"; it does not claim that such a course is in every man's private power. And it stresses the importance of early education. "It is in youth that we plant our chief habits and prejudices; it is in youth that we take our party as to profession, pursuits, and matrimony," Vaughan observes. "In youth therefore the turn is given; in youth the education even of the next generation is given; in youth the private and public character is determined; and the term of life extending but from youth to age, life ought to begin well from youth; and more especially before we take our party as to our principal objects." Franklin, Autobiography, 1375, original emphasis.

[140]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1384, added emphasis.

[141]Ibid., 1391.

[142]See Pangle, *Political Philosophy*, 21; Jerry Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought* (Lawrence, 2005), 223–4; Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and the Education of America," *American Political Science Review* 86/2 (1992), 357–68, at 360; Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin*, 199.

[143]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1359–60.

[144]Ibid., 1392.

[145]Ibid., 1398.

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Franklin writes: "Avoid extremes. Forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve."[146] To be afflicted with "want of sense" is, after all, to be "unfortunate."[147]

Far as Franklin was from Christian orthodoxy, then, he remained almost as far from Pelagianism: the prototypical self-made man refused to present himself or anyone else as genuinely self-made. Indeed, this is one reason why the *Autobiography* emphasizes not simply the possibility of individual self-improvement but also the importance of broader social and political improvements. And so, I would submit, it is not the case that "all of the early-modern theorists who laid the philosophical foundations for what we have come to call 'liberalism' … were committed Pelagians," united by a "shared conviction that human beings are radically free and responsible for their choices before God and man."[148]

Conclusion

Franklin claims that he became "a better and a happier man"[149] because he was free to experiment with his own life. He thus shows one way to make sense of the dignitarian liberal commitment to individual liberty without presuming metaphysical freedom in any strong sense. His suggestion is that a wide sphere of free action and inquiry makes room for immense improvements, emphatically including moral and intellectual improvements (not merely economistic utility maximization).[150] By contrast, if freedom were understood as a transcendent metaphysical property, as Nelson suggests it should be,[151] it is hard to see how it could be threatened by

[146]Ibid., 1385.

[147]Ibid., 1323; see also 1338–9, 1340, 1345, 1348, 1390, 1432. In an unsent 1778 letter to Arthur Lee, Franklin wrote: "If I have often received and borne your magisterial snubbings and rebukes without reply, ascribe it to the right causes: my concern for the honour and success of our [diplomatic] mission, which would be hurt by our quarrelling; my love of peace; my respect for your good qualities; and *my pity of your sick mind*, which is forever tormenting itself, with its jealousies, suspicions, and fancies that others mean you ill, wrong you, or fail in respect for you. If you do not *cure yourself* of this temper it will end in insanity, of which it is the symptomatic forerunner, as I have seen in several instances. God preserve you from so terrible an evil: and for his sake pray suffer me to live in quiet." Franklin, *Papers*, 26: 223, added emphasis. Consider also Franklin's description of John Adams as "an honest man" and "often a wise one" who was "sometimes and in some things absolutely out of his senses." Ibid., 40: 358. To be sure, in a 1782 letter, Franklin wrote, "the more I see the impossibility, from the number and extent of his crimes of giving equivalent punishment to a wicked man in this life, the more I am convinced of a future state, in which all that here appears to be wrong shall be set right, all that is crooked made straight." Ibid., 37: 587–8. Here Franklin seems to waver between a retributive view (giving measure for measure) and a corrective view (making the crooked straight) of divine punishment.

[148]Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 52.

[149]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1391.

[150]According to Levin, "Franklin's greatest achievement in this book is that of characterizing himself repeatedly as a man of inquiry. He creates for us a convincing image of the inquiring man, self-educated, testing for himself, in morality, in business, in religion, in science." David Levin, "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: The Puritan Experimenter in Life and Art," *Yale Review* 53/2 (1963), 258–75, at 266. In February 1786, Franklin wrote of America, "We are, I think, in the right road of improvement, for we are making experiments." Benjamin Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. A. H. Smyth, 12 vols. (New York, 1904), 9: 489.

[151]See Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 124.

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even the most illiberal government: on the Pelagian view, after all, one always has it within one's power to choose between good and evil. And indeed if humans are metaphysically free to choose evil as evil, as Pelagianism holds, then the characteristically liberal uneasiness with retributive punishment would seem to be mere softness.[152]

But does liberalism in some sense need free will? Franklin's *Autobiography* suggests that the answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, Franklin insists that just as citizens can improve their own communities, so private individuals can improve their own circumstances and even their own minds and characters over the long run. To this extent, Franklin affirms something that might reasonably be called free will.[153] On the other hand, Franklin forthrightly acknowledges the limits of individual freedom and hence individual responsibility; no one is simply self-made or self-making. To this extent, he implicitly rejects free will.

Now it seems to me that Franklin's ambivalence on this question reflects a broader ambivalence in liberal thought between the drive to transform humanity and a perhaps equally ambitious aspiration to affirm humanity as it is. The first tendency goes together with an insistence upon the legitimacy of universal standards, standards that all (or almost all) mature humans—precisely as free and responsible beings—can be expected to meet, irrespective of their given characteristics or histories. Illustrative of this tendency is the *Autobiography*'s famous catalogue of thirteen virtues, which Franklin lays out like a new table of commandments:

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 (i.e., 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.

[152]On the fraught status of retribution within the liberal tradition see Arthur Shuster, *Punishment and the History of Political Philosophy: From Classical Republicanism to the Crisis of Modern Criminal Justice* (Toronto, 2016), 132–41.

[153]This universalistic affirmation of human agency, out of the material provided by one's natural endowments and social advantages, makes Franklin much more egalitarian than Rawls, who (Nelson points out) "gives us an essentially hierarchical account of human nature in which the 'better endowed' take the place of the Augustinian elect." Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, 71.

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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. Tranquility
    Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity
    Rarely use venery but for health or offspring; never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. Humility
    Imitate Jesus and Socrates.[154]

The second tendency, by contrast, goes together with an insistence on the legitimacy of difference in the face of demands for conformity. Here again the *Autobiography* provides a vivid illustration, this time in Franklin's discussion of his failure to achieve moral perfection. The effort to attain the virtue of order in particular, he explains,

> cost me so 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 axe of a smith my neighbour, 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 axe 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 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*."[155]

From this point of view, individual liberty might be prized less as a means to improvement than as a shelter from the demand for improvement, or what passes for it.

Evidently this sort of ambivalence makes liberalism susceptible to conflicting excesses, and hence conflicting lines of attack. Liberalism can be accused of demanding too much—forcing unalike characters through the same mold; making benighted souls responsible for all of their own problems; forever expecting self-help and self-optimization in the pursuit of an always-receding happiness. All this provides fodder for a certain critique of liberalism, or else for a more "Augustinian" version of it (of the kind that Rawls offers, for example). But it can also be accused of demanding

[154]Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1384–5.

[155]Ibid., 1390, original emphasis. By the same token, in the very first paragraph of the book, Franklin declares that he would seize the chance to live his life over again, faults and all, if given the opportunity. Ibid., 1307. He emphatically affirms the goodness of his unique individuality, with all of its defects.

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too little—asking nothing more of us than that we "be ourselves"; furnishing compassionate excuses for every vice; encouraging self-satisfied mediocrity. And this provides fodder for a very different critique, or else for a more "Pelagian" version of liberalism (of the kind offered by Nelson, for example).

Yet rather than being imperiled by this ambivalence, I would suggest, the health of liberalism depends on it. The light in which we see ourselves as private individuals can hardly be cordoned off from the light in which we see ourselves as political actors; so without regarding ourselves as responsible agents in our own lives, it is hard to see how we could regard ourselves as free and equal citizens, substantially responsible for the well-being of our political communities, and capable of effecting civic improvements. "A culture less intent on the individual's responsibility to master destiny," one prominent critic of the meritocratic ideal has written, "might be more capacious, more generous, more gracious."[156] Franklin's analysis suggests that such a culture would also be more passive, more superstitious, more despairing. It is not by accident that Franklin advocates both a politics of improvement and an ethics of self-improvement.[157] And yet without recognizing the limits of moral responsibility, it is hard to see how we could regard ourselves and our fellow citizens as genuine individuals—with fixed dispositions, capacities, and histories—for whom reasonable allowances might be made. To adopt the Pelagian spirit wholeheartedly would therefore be to risk fostering an obscurantist moralism, along with an exhausting, homogenizing focus on improvement.

Of the two dangers, however, the greater one at present is probably not an excess of the Pelagian spirit. On the contrary, it seems that young people increasingly believe that their lives are determined by forces entirely beyond their control.[158] This looks very much like a recipe not only for a fatalistic kind of gloom but also for political passivity and conspiratorialism. So today, it seems to me, liberalism really does need free will.

Another implication of this study, however, is more theoretical: notwithstanding the new insights yielded by the theological turn in recent historiography, early-modern liberalism should probably be understood neither as decayed Christian orthodoxy nor as Pelagianism, but as an independent project. And whatever the innermost religious convictions of liberals such as Franklin might have been, the goal of that project seems to have been less salvation in the next world than the diffusion of happiness in this one.[159] If liberalism is in crisis today, its retrospective identification with theology may itself be a symptom of that crisis, or the loss of confidence in its rational defensibility.

[156]Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 22; see also Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 39–42.

[157]In this respect Franklin stands at the head of a long tradition of American liberalism—a tradition that includes Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton—that regards these things as two sides of the same coin. Koganzon notes that "Franklin is the original self-made man, and his *Autobiography* the original American self-help book." Rita Koganzon, "A Tale of Two Educational Traditions," *National Affairs* 47 (2021), 65–79, at 72.

[158]See e.g. Jean M. Twenge, Liqing Zhang, and Charles Im, "It's beyond My Control: A Cross-temporal Meta-analysis of Increasing Externality in Locus of Control, 1960–2002," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8/3 (2004), 308–19.

[159]Reflecting on his "*great and extensive project*," Franklin says that it "might have been very useful, by forming a great number of good citizens." Franklin, *Autobiography*, 1397. He presents the theological project as subordinate to the civic goal.

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