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# REASON AND POWER IN BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Perhaps no period of modern history has been more a victim of generalization than the Age of Enlightenment. The worship of reason and progress and belief in the essential goodness and perfectibility of human nature are most commonly associated with the 18th century climate of opinion. Many of the stereotypes which have been applied to it have automatically been transferred to Benjamin Franklin. Already to contemporaries of his old age, Franklin seemed the very personification of the Age of Reason. Condorcet, who had known Franklin personally, summed up his description of Franklin's political career as follows: "In a word, his politics were those of a man who believed in the power of reason and the reality of virtue."<sup>1</sup> In Germany, an admirer was even more enthusiastic: "Reason and virtue, made possible through reason alone, consequently again reason and nothing but reason, is the magic with which Benjamin Franklin conquered heaven and earth."<sup>2</sup> This is also the judgment of posterity. F. L. Mott and Chester E. Jorgensen, who have so far presented the most acute analysis of Franklin's thought and its relationship to the intellectual history of his time, do not hesitate to call him "the completest colonial representative" of the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Unanimous agreement seems to exist that Franklin was "in tune with his time."<sup>4</sup>

This essay will attempt to show that these generalizations, instead of illuminating the essence of Franklin's moral and political philosophy, tend rather to obscure some of the mainsprings of his thought and action. Our investigation rests upon the assumption that man's understanding of politics is inseparable from his conception of human nature. Consequently, this reappraisal of Franklin's political thought will subject his views on human nature to close scrutiny; it is hoped that this procedure may lead to a rejection of some of the clichés to which he has fallen victim.

<sup>1</sup> *Oeuvres du Marquis de Condorcet*, eds. A. Condorcet O'Connor and M. F. Arago, 2nd ed., 12 vols. (Paris, 1847-49), Vol. 3, p. 420.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Forster, "Erinnerungen aus dem Jahre 1790," in "Kleine Schriften," *Georg Forsters saemmtliche Schriften*, ed. by his daughter, 9 vols. (Leipzig, 1843), Vol. 6, p. 207.

<sup>3</sup> *Benjamin Franklin, Representative Selections with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*, eds. F. L. Mott and Chester E. Jorgensen (New York, 1936), p. xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Becker, review of the Franklin Institute's *Meet Dr. Franklin*, in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 50, p. 142 (Oct., 1944). Cf. Henry Steele Commager's statement that it was the faith in reason which gave unity to Franklin's life. "Franklin, the American," review of Carl Van Doren's *Benjamin Franklin*, in *New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 9, 1938, p. 1. Charles A. Beard explicitly referred to Franklin as an outstanding example of American writers on progress. Introduction to J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (New York, 1932), p. xxxvii.

## I. THE "GREAT CHAIN OF BEING"

Many of the notions which are commonly applied to the 18th century, such as the belief in progress and in the perfectibility of human nature, are significant chiefly with respect to the currents of thought and action related to the American and French Revolutions, and do little to deepen our understanding of earlier developments. So it is to the first half of the 18th century that we must now turn. We are prone to overlook the extraordinary difference in age which separated Franklin from the other Founding Fathers of the Republic. Franklin was born in 1706, twenty-six years before Washington, twenty-nine years before John Adams, thirty-seven years before Jefferson, thirty-nine years before John Jay, forty-five years before James Madison, and fifty-one years before Alexander Hamilton.

Franklin's fame as a social and natural philosopher rests mainly on the achievements of his middle and late years. One needs to remember, however, that he was a moral philosopher long before he became a natural philosopher and before he advised his fellowmen how to acquire wealth.<sup>5</sup> At the age of twenty-two, he formed a "club for mutual improvement,"<sup>6</sup> the Junto, where great emphasis was laid on moral or political problems. Whether self-interest was the root of human action, whether man could attain perfection, whether "encroachments on the just liberties of the people"<sup>7</sup> had taken place—all these things were matters of discussion at Franklin's club. Already at the age of nineteen, during his first stay in London, he had printed his first independent opus, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*.<sup>8</sup> This piece

<sup>5</sup> Even after having achieved world-wide fame as a natural philosopher, he observed that we deserve reprehension if "we neglect the Knowledge and Practice of essential Duties" in order to attain eminence in the knowledge of nature. *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Henry Albert Smyth, 10 vols. (New York, 1905-7), Vol. 4, p. 22. (Hereafter cited as *Writings*.)

<sup>6</sup> *Autobiography, Writings*, Vol. I, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> James Parton, *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Boston, 1897), Vol. I, p. 160. See also *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 89. The authors who so far have most closely scrutinized Franklin's political thought do not see the relevance of many of the younger Franklin's remarks on human nature, arbitrary government, or the nature of political dispute to his concept of politics. See M. R. Eiselen, *Franklin's Political Theories* (Garden City, N. Y., 1928), p. 13; R. D. Miles, "The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin," unpub. diss. (Univ. of Michigan, 1949), p. 36; *Benjamin Franklin, Representative Selections* (cited in note 3), p. lxxxii. The most recent work in this field, Clinton Rossiter's "The Political Theory of Benjamin Franklin," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 76, pp. 259-93 (July, 1952), pays no attention to Franklin's conception of human nature and his attitude towards the problem of power and the ends of political life. Rossiter's contention (p. 268) is that Franklin "limited his own thought process to the one devastating question: *Does it work?*, or more exactly, *Does it work well?*" Franklin, however, like everybody else, had certain ends and goals in view, and the question "Does it work?" is meaningless without the context of certain basic desiderata.

<sup>8</sup> This little work has been omitted in the Smyth edition of Franklin's writings, because "the work has no value, and it would be an injury and an offence to the memory of Franklin to republish it." *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. vi. It is, however, reprinted as an appendix to Parton, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, and has since been republished independently with a bibliographical note by Lawrence C. Wroth (New York, 1930).

showed that no trace was left of his Presbyterian family background. The secularization of his thought had been completed.<sup>9</sup> Gone were the Puritan belief in revelation and the Christian conception of human nature which, paradoxically, included the notion of the depravity of man, as well as of his uniqueness among all created beings.<sup>10</sup> Franklin's *Dissertation* shows that he was thoroughly acquainted with the leading ideas of his time. The early decades of the 18th century were characterized by the climate of opinion which has been aptly called "cosmic Toryism."<sup>11</sup> Pope's *Essay on Man* and many pages of Addison's *Spectator*—both of which Franklin admired—most perfectly set forth the creed of a new age. Overshadowing everything else, there was joy about the discoveries of the human mind, which had solved the enigma of creation:

Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night:  
GOD said, *Let Newton be!* and all was Light.<sup>12</sup>

The perfection of that Great Machine, the Newtonian universe, filling humanity with admiration for the Divine Watchmaker, seemed to suggest that this world was indeed the best of all possible worlds. Everything was necessary, was good. Pope's "Whatever is, is right," is the key phrase of this period. The goodness of the Creator revealed itself in His giving existence to all possible creatures. The universe "presented the spectacle of a continuous scale or ladder of creatures, extending without a break from the worm to the seraph."<sup>13</sup> Somewhere in this "Great Chain of Being," to use a favorite phrase of the

<sup>9</sup> See Herbert Schneider, "The Significance of Benjamin Franklin's Moral Philosophy," *Columbia University Studies in the History of Ideas*, Vol. 2, p. 298 (1918).

<sup>10</sup> In his *Autobiography*, Franklin acknowledges his debt to Shaftesbury and Collins for becoming "a real doubter in many points of our religious doctrine." *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 244. The question of Franklin's attitude toward the great moral philosophers and of their influence upon him is considerably more difficult to determine than the same question with regard to John Adams or Thomas Jefferson. With the exception of authors named in the *Autobiography*, comments on books Franklin read are extremely rare. His library has not been preserved; there is, however, a list of books known to have been in Franklin's library at the time of his death (compiled by Dr. George Simpson Eddy in Princeton University; photostat in the library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia). See also Mr. Eddy's article, "Dr. Benjamin Franklin's Library," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, new series, Vol. 34, pp. 206-26 (Oct., 1924). Except for comments in some English pamphlets, there exist nothing like the voluminous marginal notes of John Adams and Jefferson. Also he was not able to keep up a correspondence like Adams' or Jefferson's, discussing great problems from the perspective of a long life in retirement after the great events of their lives had taken place. Immersed in public business almost until his death, Franklin does not seem to have had much time left over for reading. Benjamin Rush told John Adams that "Dr. Franklin thought a great deal, wrote occasionally, but read during the middle and later years of his life very little." October 31, 1807, in Benjamin Rush, *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1951), Vol. 2, p. 953. For a compilation of the authors with whom Franklin was acquainted, see Lois Margaret MacLaurin, *Franklin's Vocabulary* (Garden City, N. Y., 1928), Ch. 1, and *Benjamin Franklin, Representative Selections* (cited in note 3), p. lv.

<sup>11</sup> Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (London, 1940), Ch. 3, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Pope's epitaph intended for Newton's tomb.

<sup>13</sup> Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 47-48.

period,<sup>14</sup> there must be a place for Man. Man, as it were, formed the "middle link" between lower and higher creatures. No wonder, then, that Franklin chose as a motto for his *Dissertation* the following lines of Dryden:

Whatever is, is in its Causes just,  
 Since all Things are by Fate; but purblind Man  
 Sees but a part o' th' Chain, the nearest Link,  
 His Eyes not carrying to the equal Beam  
 That poises all above.<sup>15</sup>

The consequences of the conception of the universe as a "Great Chain of Being" for Franklin's understanding of human nature are highly significant. To be sure, man had liberated himself from the oppression of Original Sin, and in his newly established innocence he hailed the Creator and praised the Creation. But if the depravity of human nature had been banished, so had man's striving for redemption, man's aspiration for perfection. There was nothing left which ought to be redeemed. Indeed, in the new rational order of the universe, it would not seem proper to long for a higher place in the hierarchy of beings. Man's release from the anguish of Original Sin was accompanied by a lowering of the goals of human life. "The imperfection of man is indispensable to the fullness of the hierarchy of being." Man had, so to speak, already attained the grade of perfection which belonged to his station. From the point of view of mortality, then, what this amounted to was a "counsel of imperfection—an ethics of prudent mediocrity."<sup>16</sup>

Quiet contentment with, and enjoyment of, one's place in the Great Chain of Being must have been a comforting creed for the wealthy and educated classes of the Augustan Age:

Order is Heav'n's first law; and this confest,  
 Some are, and must be, greater than the rest,  
 More rich, more wise.<sup>17</sup>

This was not the optimism of progress, which we usually associate with the eighteenth century. It was an optimism of acceptance;<sup>18</sup> for the rich and complacent, the real and the good seemed indeed to coincide.

Not so for Benjamin Franklin. Late in his life, in 1771, he referred to "the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred." His innate desire for

<sup>14</sup> See A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936). This brilliant analysis of that complex of ideas has been applied to Franklin only once, although it offers important clues for an understanding of Franklin's conception of human nature. Arthur Stuart Pitt in "The Sources, Significance, and Date of Franklin's 'An Arabian Tale,'" *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, Vol. 57, pp. 155-68 (March, 1942), applies Lovejoy's analysis to one piece of Franklin's and does not refer to relevant writings of Franklin's youth in which this idea may also be found. Pitt's article is valuable in pointing out the sources from which Franklin could have accepted the idea directly, namely Locke, Milton, Addison, and Pope.

<sup>15</sup> Parton, *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (cited in note 7), Vol. 1, p. 605.

<sup>16</sup> Lovejoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 199, 200.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man," Epistle 4, in *Selected Works*, Modern Library ed. (New York, 1948), p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

justice and equality, his keen awareness of existing conditions of injustice and inequality, finally his own experience of things which he could not possibly call just or good—for instance, he tells us that his brother's "harsh and tyrannical treatment of me might be a means of impressing me with that aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me through my whole life"<sup>19</sup>—all this contravened the facile optimism of the Augustan Age.

Franklin, indeed, accepted the cosmological premises of his age (as witness the above quoted motto of the *Dissertation*). But his conclusions make the edifice of "Cosmic Toryism"—so imposing in Pope's magnificent language—appear a mockery and an absurdity. Franklin's argumentation was simple enough: God being all-powerful and good, man could have no free will, and the distinction between good and evil had to be abolished. He also argued that pain or uneasiness was the mainspring of all our actions, and that pleasure was produced by the removal of this uneasiness. It followed that "*No State of Life can be happier than the present, because Pleasure and Pain are inseparable.*" The unintentional irony of this brand of optimism cannot be better expressed than in young Franklin's conclusion:

I am sensible that the Doctrine here advanc'd, if it were to be publish'd, would meet with but an indifferent Reception. Mankind naturally and generally love to be flatter'd: What-ever soothes our Pride, and tends to exalt our Species above the rest of the Creation, we are pleas'd with and easily believe, when ungrateful Truths shall be with the utmost Indignation rejected. "What! bring ourselves down to an Equality with the Beasts of the Field! With the *meanest* part of the Creation! 'Tis insufferable!" But, (to use a Piece of *common Sense*) our *Geese* are but *Geese* tho' we may think 'em *Swans*; and Truth will be Truth tho' it sometimes prove mortifying and distasteful.<sup>20</sup>

The dilemma which confronted him at the age of nineteen is characteristic of most eighteenth-century philosophy: "If nature is good, then there is no evil in the world; if there is evil in the world, then nature so far is not good."<sup>21</sup>

Franklin cut this Gordian knot by sacrificing "Reason" to "Experience." He turned away from metaphysics for the quite pragmatic reason that his denial of good and evil did not provide him with a basis for the attainment of social and individual happiness:

Revelation had indeed no weight with me, as such; but I entertain'd an opinion that, though certain actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them, yet probably these actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us. . . .<sup>22</sup>

To achieve useful things rather than indulge in doubtful metaphysical speculations, to become a doer of good—these, then, became the principal aims of Franklin's thought and action.<sup>23</sup>

This fundamental change from the earlier to the later Enlightenment—from

<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography, Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 226, 247 (n.1).

<sup>20</sup> Parton, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 617.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1932), p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> *Autobiography, Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 296. See also *Writings*, Vol. 7, p. 412.

<sup>23</sup> See *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 341; Vol. 2, p. 215; Vol. 3, p. 145; Vol. 9, p. 208; Vol. 10, p. 38.



passive contemplation to improvement, from a static to a dynamic conception of human affairs—did contribute to the substitution of the idea of human perfectibility for the idea of human perfection—a very limited kind of perfection, as we have seen; but it was by no means sufficient to bring about the faith in the perfectibility of human nature. Something else was needed: proof that “social evils were due neither to innate and incorrigible disabilities of the human being nor the nature of things, but simply to ignorance and prejudices.”<sup>24</sup> The associationist psychology, elaborating Locke’s theory of the malleability of human nature, provided the basis for the expansion of the idea of progress and perfectibility from the purely intellectual domain into the realm of moral and social life in general. The Age of Reason, then, presents us with a more perplexing picture than we might have supposed.

Reason, after all, may mean three different things: reason as a faculty of man; reason as a quality of the universe; and reason as a temper in the conduct of human affairs.<sup>25</sup> We might venture the generalization that the earlier Enlightenment stressed reason as the quality of the Newtonian universe, whereas the later Enlightenment, in spite of important exceptions, exalted the power of human reason to mold the moral and social life of mankind.<sup>26</sup> Franklin’s “reason,” as we shall see presently, is above all a temper in the conduct of human affairs.

This discussion is important for a correct understanding of Franklin’s position in the center of the cross-currents of the Age of Enlightenment. The fact that the roots of his thought are to be found in the early Enlightenment is not always realized, or, if realized, not always sufficiently explained. Julian P. Boyd, in his introduction to Carl Becker’s biographical sketch of Franklin, states that Franklin and Jefferson believed “that men would be amenable to rational persuasion, that they would thereby be induced to promote their own and their fellows’ best interests, and that, in the end, perfect felicity for man and society would be achieved.”<sup>27</sup> These ideas are certainly suggestive of the later Enlightenment, and appear to be more applicable to Jefferson than to Franklin. Carl Becker himself asserts, somewhat ambiguously and with undue generalization, that Franklin “was a true child of the Enlightenment, not indeed of the school of Rousseau, but of Defoe and Pope and Swift, of Fontenelle and Montesquieu and Voltaire.”<sup>28</sup> There is little evidence that this school prophesied the achievement of perfect felicity for man and society.

Bernard Mandeville, a personal acquaintance of Franklin, joined the chorus of those who proclaimed the compatibility of human imperfection and the

<sup>24</sup> Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (cited in note 4), p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> This distinction is Roland Bainton’s. See his “The Appeal to Reason and the American Revolution,” in *The Constitution Reconsidered*, ed. Conyers Read (New York, 1938), p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. A. O. Lovejoy’s statement: “The authors who were perhaps the most influential and the most representative in the early and mid-eighteenth century, made a great point of reducing man’s claims to ‘reason’ to a minimum.” “‘Pride’ in Eighteenth Century Thought,” in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, 1948), p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Carl Becker, *Benjamin Franklin* (Ithaca, 1946), p. ix.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

general harmony. "Private Vices, Public Benefits" was the subtitle of his famous *Fable of the Bees*, which Franklin owned and probably read. Mandeville's paradoxical doctrines must have been a powerful challenge to Franklin's young mind. "The Moral Virtues," Mandeville asserted in terms reminiscent of Machiavelli, "are the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride." While arguing that men are actuated by self-interest and that this self-interest promotes the prosperity of society as a whole, Mandeville maintains a rigorous standard of virtue, declaring those acts alone to be virtuous "by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavour the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good."<sup>29</sup>

By making ethical standards so excessively rigorous, Mandeville rendered them impossible of observance, and indirectly (though intentionally) pointed out their irrelevance for practical life. The very rigor of his ethical demands in contrast to his practical devices suggests that Mandeville lacked "idealism." This was not the case with Franklin. The consciously paradoxical Mandeville could offer no salvation for the young Franklin caught on the horns of his own dilemma. Shaftesbury, Mandeville's *bête noire*—whose works were already familiar to Franklin—had a more promising solution. In his *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699), Shaftesbury had asserted that man by nature possesses a faculty to distinguish and to prefer what is right—the famous "moral sense."

Franklin's option for Shaftesbury was made clear from his reprinting two dialogues "Between Philocles and Horatio, . . . concerning Virtue and Pleasure" from the *London Journal* of 1729 in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of 1730. In the second dialogue, reason was described as the chief faculty of man, and reasonable and morally good actions were defined as actions preservative of the human kind and naturally tending to produce real and unmixed happiness. These dialogues until recently have been held to be Franklin's own work; however, a reference in the *Autobiography* to a "Socratic dialogue" and "a discourse on self-denial," traditionally interpreted as concerning the two dialogues between Philocles and Horatio, recently has been shown to concern two pieces published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of 1735. The first piece is a dialogue between Crito and Socrates, never before correctly attributed to Franklin, in which he asserted that the "SCIENCE OF VIRTUE" was "of more worth, and of more consequence" to one's happiness than all other knowledge put together; in the second piece, a discourse on self-denial, Franklin combated the (Mandevillean) idea that "the greater the *Self-Denial* the greater the Virtue." Thirty-three years later, Franklin was still following Shaftesbury when he exhorted: "Be in general virtuous, and you will be happy." However, we shall see later that Franklin, in the last analysis, was not as far removed from Mandeville's pessimism as these cheerful views would suggest. His was a sort of middle position between Mandeville's "realism" and Shaftesbury's "idealism."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924), Vol. 1, pp. 48–49, 51. Franklin owned Mandeville's work, according to a list in the Mason-Franklin Collection of the Yale University Library. He was introduced to Mandeville during his first stay in London. *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 278.

<sup>30</sup> The proof that the two dialogues between Philocles and Horatio were not written



## II. THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

The restraining influence of the idea of the Great Chain of Being retained its hold on Franklin after his return to a more conventional recognition of good and evil. In his "Articles of Belief" of 1728 he said that "Man is not the most perfect Being but one, rather as there are many Degrees of Beings his Inferiors, so there are many Degrees of Beings superior to him."<sup>31</sup> Franklin presented the following question and answers to the discussions in the Junto:

Can a man arrive at perfection in his life, as some believe; or is it impossible, as others believe?

*Answer.* Perhaps they differ in the meaning of the word *perfection*. I suppose the perfection of any thing to be only the greatest the nature of the thing is capable of. . . .

If they mean a man cannot in this life be so perfect as an angel, it may be true; for an angel, by being incorporeal, is allowed some perfections we are at present incapable of, and less liable to some imperfections than we are liable to. If they mean a man is not capable of being perfect here as he is capable of being in heaven, that may be true likewise. But that a man is not capable of being so perfect here, is not sense. . . . In the above sense, there may be a perfect oyster, a perfect horse, a perfect ship; why not a perfect man? That is, as perfect as his present nature and circumstance admit.<sup>32</sup>

We note here the acknowledgment of man's necessarily "imperfect" state of perfection. However, it is striking to see that Franklin refused to employ this theory as a justification of the status quo. Within certain bounds, change, or progress for the better, was possible. Many years later, Franklin was to use exactly the same argument in the debate on the status of America within the British Empire. A pro-English writer had presented the familiar argument of "Cosmic Toryism" (and of conservatism in general, of course): "To expect perfection in human institutions is absurd." Franklin retorted indignantly: "Does this justify any and every Imperfection that can be invented or added to our Constitution?"<sup>33</sup>

This attitude differs from the belief in moral progress and perfectibility. There are, however, some passages in Franklin's later writings, better known than the preceding ones, which seem to suggest his agreement with the creed of moral progress and perfectibility. Two years before his death, looking with considerable satisfaction upon the achievements of his country and his own life, he explained to a Boston clergyman his belief in "the growing felicity of mankind, from the improvements in philosophy, morals, politics"; he also stressed "the invention and acquisition of new and useful utensils and instru-

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by Franklin and the identification of the two other pieces have been furnished by Alfred O. Aldridge, "Franklin's 'Shaftesburian' Dialogues Not Franklin's: A Revision of the Franklin Canon," *American Literature*, Vol. 21, pp. 151-59 (May, 1949). See also *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 343; Vol. 2, pp. 168-69. The discourse on self-denial is printed in *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. John Bigelow, 10 vols. (New York, 1887-88), Vol. 1, pp. 414-17. The last quote, written in 1768, is in *Writings*, Vol. 5, p. 159.

<sup>31</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 92; see also Vol. 10, p. 124 and note 14, above.

<sup>32</sup> *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Jared Sparks, 10 vols. (Boston, 1836-40), Vol. 2, p. 554.

<sup>33</sup> Franklin's marginal notes in [Matthew C. Wheelock], *Reflections Moral and Political on Great Britain and the Colonies* (London, 1770), p. 48. Franklin's copy in the Jefferson Collection of the Library of Congress.

ments" and concluded that "invention and improvement are prolific. . . . The present progress is rapid." However, he immediately added: "I see a little absurdity in what I have just written, but it is to a friend, who will wink and let it pass."<sup>34</sup>

There remains, then, a wide gulf between this qualified view of human progress and the exuberant joy over the progress of man's rational and moral faculties so perfectly expressed in the lines of a good friend of Franklin's, the British non-conformist clergyman and philosopher, Joseph Priestley:

Whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and paradisiacal beyond what our imaginations can now conceive. Extravagant as some people may suppose these views to be, I think I could show them to be fairly suggested by the true theory of human nature and to arise from the natural course of human affairs.<sup>35</sup>

Franklin himself was well aware of this gulf. He distinguished sharply between man's intellectual progress and the steadily increasing power of man over matter, on the one hand, and the permanency of moral imperfection, on the other. He wrote to Priestley in 1782:

I should rejoice much, if I could once more recover the Leisure to search with you into the works of Nature; I mean the *inanimate*, not the *animate* or moral part of them, the more I discover'd of the former, the more I admir'd them; the more I know of the latter, the more I am disgusted with them. Men I find to be a Sort of Beings very badly constructed, as they are generally more easily provok'd than reconcil'd, more disposed to do Mischief to each other than to make Reparation, much more easily deceiv'd than undeceiv'd, and having more Pride and even Pleasure in killing than in begetting one another.

He had begun to doubt, he continued, whether "the Species were really worth producing or preserving. . . . I know, you have no such Doubts because, in your zeal for their welfare, you are taking a great deal of pains to save their Souls. Perhaps, as you grow older, you may look upon this as a hopeless Project."<sup>36</sup>

One is struck by the remarkable constancy of Franklin's views on human nature. In 1787 he tried to dissuade the author of a work on natural religion from publishing it. In this famous letter, we may find the quintessence of Franklin's concept of human nature. There is little of the trust in human reason which is so generally supposed to be a mark of his moral teachings:

You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous Life, without the Assistance afforded by Religion; you having a clear perception of the Advantages of Virtue, and the Disadvantages of Vice, and possessing a Strength of Resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common Temptations. But think how great a Proportion of Mankind consists of weak and ignorant Men and Women, and of inexperienc'd, and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the Motives of Religion to restrain them from Vice, and support their Virtue, and retain them in the Practice of it till it becomes *habitual*, which is the Great Point for its Security. . . . If men are so wicked as we now see them *with religion*, what would they be *if without it*?<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 651. See also Vol. 9, pp. 489, 530; Vol. 1, p. 226.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (cited in note 4), pp. 221-22.

<sup>36</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 8, pp. 451-52.

<sup>37</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, pp. 521-22. See also Vol. 2, pp. 203, 393, and Vol. 9, pp. 600-1.

One is reminded of Gibbon's approval of conditions in the Rome of the Antonines, where all religions were considered equally false by the wise, equally true by the people, and equally useful by the magistrates.

### III. THE BELIEF IN "REASON"

Reason as a temper in the conduct of human affairs counted much with Franklin, as we shall see later. However, reason as a faculty of the human mind, stronger than our desires or passions, counted far less. Often Franklin candidly and smilingly referred to the weakness of reason. In his *Autobiography*, he tells us of his struggle "between principle and inclination" when, on his first voyage to Philadelphia, his vegetarian principles came into conflict with his love of eating fish. Remembering that greater fish ate the smaller ones, he did not see any reason why he should not eat fish: "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for every thing one has a mind to do."<sup>38</sup>

Reason as a guide to human happiness was recognized by Franklin only to a limited degree.

Our Reason would still be of more Use to us, if it could enable us to *prevent* the Evils it can hardly enable us to *bear*.—But in that it is so deficient, and in other things so often misleads us, that I have sometimes been almost tempted to wish we had been furnished with a good sensible Instinct instead of it.<sup>39</sup>

Trial and error appeared to him more useful to this end than abstract reasoning. "We are, I think, in the right Road of Improvement, for we are making Experiments. I do not oppose all that seem wrong, for the Multitude are more effectually set right by Experience, than kept from going wrong by Reasoning with them." Another time he put it even more bluntly: "What assurance of the *Future* can be better founded than that which is built on Experience of the *Past*?"<sup>40</sup> His scepticism about the efficacy of "reason" also appears in his opinion that "happiness in this life rather depends on internals than externals; and that, besides the natural effects of wisdom and virtue, vice and folly, there is such a thing as a happy or an unhappy constitution."<sup>41</sup>

There remains one problem with regard to Franklin's rather modest view of the power of human reason in moral matters: his serenity—some might call it complacency—in spite of his awareness of the disorder and imperfection of human life. Sometimes, it is true, he was uneasy:

<sup>38</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 267. See also Vol. 5, p. 225, and Vol. 9, p. 512.

<sup>39</sup> *The Letters of Benjamin Franklin & Jane Mecom*, ed. Carl Van Doren (Princeton, 1950), p. 112.

<sup>40</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 489, and Vol. 4, p. 250. On another occasion Franklin acknowledged the weakness of reason by the use of a pungent folk saying: "An Answer now occurs to me, for that Question of Robinson Crusoe's Man Friday, which I once thought unanswerable, *Why God no kill the Devil?* It is to be found in the Scottish Proverb, '*Ye'd do little for God an the Dell' were dead.*'" To John Whitehurst, New York, June 27, 1763. Unpub. letter in the Mason-Franklin Collection of the Yale University Library. Cf. also Vol. 3, pp. 16–17, Vol. 4, p. 120, and Vol. 6, p. 424.

<sup>41</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 457. See also Vol. 9, p. 548.

I rather suspect, from certain circumstances, that though the general government of the universe is well administered, our particular little affairs are perhaps below notice, and left to take the chance of human prudence or imprudence, as either may happen to be uppermost. It is, however, an uncomfortable thought, and I leave it.<sup>42</sup>

But on another occasion Franklin felt obliged to quiet the anxieties of his sister, who had been upset by his remark that men "are devils to one another":

I meant no more by saying Mankind were Devils to one another, than that being in general superior to the Malice of the other Creatures, they were not so much tormented by them as by themselves. Upon the whole I am much disposed to like the World as I find it, & to doubt my own Judgment as to what would mend it. I see so much Wisdom in what I understand of its Creation and Government, that I suspect equal Wisdom may be in what I do not understand: And thence have perhaps as much Trust in God as the most pious Christian.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, Franklin's pessimism does not contain that quality of the tragic sense of life which inevitably presents itself wherever a recognition of the discrepancy between man's actual depravity and the loftiness of his aspirations exists.

We suggest a threefold explanation for this phenomenon: first of all, as we have pointed out, the complex of ideas associated with the concept of the "Great Chain of Being," predominant at the time of Franklin's youth, worked in favor of bridging this gulf by lowering the goals of human endeavor. Secondly, the success story of his own life taught him that certain valuable things in human life can be achieved. Thirdly, we cannot help thinking that Franklin himself was endowed with that "happy constitution" which he deemed a requisite for true happiness in this life.

#### IV. THE PASSION OF PRIDE

Having discovered that Franklin acknowledged the imperfection of human reason and consequently the existence and importance of the passions to a greater degree than one might have supposed, let us specify in greater detail his insight into the nature of the two outstanding passions of social life, the desire for wealth and the desire for power—avarice and ambition. "That I may avoid Avarice and Ambition . . . —Help me, O Father," was Franklin's prayer in the "Articles of Belief" of 1728.<sup>44</sup>

The universal fame of Poor Richard and the description of Franklin's own "way to wealth" in his *Autobiography* (Franklin's account of his life ends with his arrival in London in 1757 for the first of his three great public missions in Europe) have led many people to see in Franklin only the ingenious businessman pursuing thrift for thrift's sake and money for money's sake. Nothing could be further from the truth than this conception. To be sure, he recognized the existence and the nature of avarice in unequivocal terms: "The Love of

<sup>42</sup> Rev. L. Tyerman, *Life of the Rev. George Whitefield*, 2 vols. (London, 1876), Vol. 2, pp. 540–41, quoted in *Benjamin Franklin, Representative Selections* (cited in note 3), p. cxxxvi.

<sup>43</sup> *The Letters of Benjamin Franklin & Jane Mecom* (cited in note 39), pp. 124, 125–26. See also *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 61; Vol. 4, p. 388; Vol. 9, p. 247.

<sup>44</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 99.

Money is not a Thing of certain Measure, so as that it may be easily filled and satisfied. Avarice is infinite; and where there is not good Oeconomy, no Salary, however large, will prevent Necessity."<sup>45</sup> He denied, however, that desire for more wealth actuated his work. His early retirement from business (1748) to devote himself to the higher things of life—chiefly to public service and scientific research—seems to prove this point.

Franklin considered wealth essentially as means to an end. He knew that it was not easy "for an empty sack to stand upright." He looked upon his fortune as an essential factor in his not having succumbed to corruption.<sup>46</sup> In a famous and often quoted letter to his mother, Franklin said that at the end of his life he "would rather have it said, *He lived usefully* than *He died Rich.*" At about the same time (two years after his retirement) he wrote to his printer friend William Strahan in England: "London citizens, they say, are ambitious of what they call *dying worth* a great sum. The very notion seems to me absurd."<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, the motive of power and prestige found much earlier recognition in Franklin's writings; he even confessed candidly that he himself was not free from this desire and from the feeling of being superior to his fellowmen. At the age of sixteen, in his first secret contributions to his brother's *New-England Courant* (he wrote under the pseudonym Mrs. Dogood), he gave a satisfactory definition of what we nowadays would call lust for power, and what was in the eighteenth century called Pride:

Among the many reigning Vices of the Town which may at any Time come under my Consideration and Reprehension, there is none which I am more inclin'd to expose than that of *Pride*. It is acknowledged by all to be a Vice the most hateful to God and Man. Even those who nourish it themselves, hate to see it in others. The proud Man aspires after Nothing less than an unlimited Superiority over his Fellow-Creatures.<sup>48</sup>

As Arthur O. Lovejoy has pointed out, the idea of Pride was frequently contemplated during the earlier half of the eighteenth century.<sup>49</sup> There are two different, though not unrelated, conceptions of Pride. First of all, it means "the most powerful and pervasive of all passions," which manifests itself in two forms: self-esteem and desire for the admiration of others. The second conception is closely connected with the idea of the Scale of Being; it means the generic Pride of man as such, the sin against the laws of order, of gradation, the revolt of man against the station which has been allotted to him by the Creator.

These different conceptions of Pride are indeed inseparable. In Franklin's own writings, the accent is on the first rather than on the second meaning.

<sup>45</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 5, p. 325.

<sup>46</sup> *The Letters of Benjamin Franklin & Jane Mecom* (cited in note 39), p. 123.

<sup>47</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 3, pp. 5, 6. Cf. Benjamin Rush to John Adams: "The Doctor was a rigid economist, but he was in every stage of his life charitable, hospitable, and generous." August 19, 1811, in *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (cited in note 10), Vol. 2, p. 1093.

<sup>48</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 2, pp. 18–19.

<sup>49</sup> Lovejoy, "'Pride' in Eighteenth Century Thought," (cited in note 26), p. 62–68.



This topic runs through his work like a red thread. In 1729, at the age of 23, he wrote that "almost every Man has a strong natural Desire of being valu'd and esteem'd by the rest of his Species."<sup>50</sup> Observations in a letter written in 1751 testify to his keen psychological insight:

What you mention concerning the love of praise is indeed very true; it reigns more or less in every heart, though we are generally hypocrites, in that respect, and pretend to disregard praise. . . . Being forbid to praise themselves, they learn instead of it to censure others; which is only a roundabout way of praising themselves. . . . This fondness for ourselves, rather than malevolence to others, I take to be the general source of censure. . . .<sup>51</sup>

Quite revealing with regard to our discussion is Franklin's well-known account of his project of an "Art of Virtue." His list of virtues to be practiced contained at first only twelve: "But a Quaker friend having kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud . . . I added *Humility* to my list. . . . 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."<sup>52</sup> His account of his rise in Pennsylvania's public life and politics reflects his joy and pride about his career. In 1737 he was appointed Postmaster of Philadelphia and Justice of the Peace; in 1744 he established the American Philosophical Society; in 1748 he was chosen a member of the Council of Philadelphia; in 1749 he was appointed Provincial Grandmaster of the Colonial Masons; in 1750 he was appointed one of the commissioners to treat with the Indians in Carlisle; and in 1751 he became a member of the Assembly of Pennsylvania. He was particularly pleased with this last appointment, and he admitted candidly that his ambition was "flatter'd by all these promotions; it certainly was; for, considering my low beginning, they were great things to me."<sup>53</sup>

There is no change of emphasis with respect to Pride during his long life. The old man of 78 denounces the evil of Pride with no less fervor, though with more self-knowledge, than the boy of 16:

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.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, the experience of English political life which he acquired during his two protracted stays in England (from 1757 to 1762, and from 1765 to 1775) made an indelible impression on his mind. The corruption and venality in English politics and the disastrous blunders of English politicians which

<sup>50</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 108.

<sup>51</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 3, pp. 54-55.

<sup>52</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 337.

<sup>53</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 374. For Franklin's acknowledgment of his own political ambition, see *Writings*, Vol. 5, pp. 148, 206, 357; Vol. 9, pp. 488, 621.

<sup>54</sup> *Autobiography* (end of the part written in Passy, France, 1784), *Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 339.

Franklin traced back to this cause<sup>56</sup> probably were the main reasons why he advocated at the Federal Convention of 1787 what he himself said some might regard as a "Utopian Idea": the abolition of salaries for the chief executive. The reason he gave for advocating such a step has hitherto not been appreciated as being of crucial importance for an understanding of his political thought:

There are two Passions which have a powerful Influence in the Affairs of Men. These are *Ambition* and *Avarice*; the Love of Power and the Love of Money. Separately, each of these has great Force in prompting Men to Action; but when united in View of the same Object, they have in many minds the most violent Effects. Place before the Eyes of such Men a Post of *Honour*, that shall at the same time be a Place of *Profit*, and they will move Heaven and Earth to obtain it.<sup>56</sup>

It has never been pointed out that this scheme of what might be called the "separation of passions" had been ripening in Franklin's mind for several years. The first expression of it is to be found early in 1783.<sup>57</sup> In 1784 he mentioned it several times, and it is in these statements that we find one of the few allusions to the concept of checks and balances in Franklin's thought. He recommended: "Make every place of *honour* a place of *burthen*. By that means the effect of one of the passions above-mentioned would be taken away and something would be added to counteract the other."<sup>58</sup>

#### V. THE NATURE OF POLITICS

Franklin's frequent praise of the general welfare did not blind him to the fact that most other people had a much narrower vision than his own. "Men will always be powerfully influenced in their Opinions and Actions by what appears to be their particular Interest," he wrote in his first tract on political economy, at the age of twenty-three.<sup>59</sup> Fortunately, one of the very few memoranda and notes dealing with the studies and discussions of young Franklin which have come to our knowledge directly concerns this problem. Franklin himself, in his *Autobiography*, gives us the text of "*Observations* on my reading history, in Library, May 19th, 1731" which, in his words, had been "accidentally preserv'd":

That the great affairs of the world, the wars, revolutions, etc., are carried on and affected by parties.

That the view of these parties is their present general interest, or what they take to be such.

That the different views of these different parties occasion all confusion.

That while a party is carrying on a general design, each man has his particular private interest in view.

That as soon as a party has gain'd its general point, each member becomes intent upon

<sup>55</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 10, p. 62. See also Vol. 5, pp. 100, 112, 117, 133. See also *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press, 1758-1775*, ed. Verner W. Crane (Chapel Hill, 1950), pp. 59, 164, 232.

<sup>56</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 591.

<sup>57</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 23.

<sup>58</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 170. See also *ibid.*, pp. 172 and 260.

<sup>59</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 139.

his particular interest; which, thwarting others, breaks that party into divisions, and occasions more confusion.

That few in public affairs act from a mere view of the good of their country, whatever they may pretend; and, tho' their actings bring real good to their country, yet men primarily considered that their own and their country's interest was united, and did not act from a principle of benevolence.

That fewer still, in public affairs, act with a view for the good of mankind. . . .<sup>60</sup>

These lines do not mirror Shaftesbury's benevolent altruism; Franklin's contention that men act primarily from their own interest "and . . . not . . . from a principle of benevolence," "tho' their actings bring real good to their country," strongly suggests the general theme of Mandeville's work: "Private vices, public benefits."

Many decades after the foregoing observations, the contrast between Franklin's views on politics and those of the enlightened rationalism of contemporary France is clearly expressed in a discussion with the French physiocrat Dupont de Nemours. Dupont had suggested that the Federal Convention be delayed until the separate constitutions of the member states were corrected—according to physiocratic principles, of course. Franklin mildly observed that "we must not expect that a new government may be formed, as a game of chess may be played." He stressed that in the game of politics there were so many players with so many strong and various prejudices, "and their particular interests, independent of the general, seeming so opposite," that "the play is more like *tric-trac* with a box of dice."<sup>61</sup> In public, and when he was propagandizing for America in Europe, Franklin played down the evils of party strife: after the end of the War of Independence he conceded somewhat apologetically that "it is true, in some of the States there are Parties and Discords." He contended now that parties "are the common lot of Humanity," and that they exist wherever there is liberty; they even, perhaps, help to preserve it. "By the Collision of different Sentiments, Sparks of Truth are struck out, and Political Light is obtained."<sup>62</sup>

In private, Franklin did not conceal his suspicion that "unity out of discord" was not as easily achieved as his just quoted method of obtaining "political light" might suggest. But he certainly did not believe that passions and prejudices always, or even usually, overrule enlightened self-interest. He held that "there is a vast variety of good and ill Events, that are in some degree the Effects of Prudence or the want of it."<sup>63</sup> He believed that "reasonable sensible Men, can always make a reasonable scheme appear such to other reasonable Men, if they take Pains, and have Time and Opportunity for it. . . ." However, this dictum is severely limited by the conclusion: ". . . unless from some Circumstance their Honesty and Good Intentions are suspected."<sup>64</sup> That Franklin thought those circumstances to exist frequently, we learn from a famous mes-

<sup>60</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 339–40. Cf. also Vol. 2, p. 196, and Vol. 4, p. 322.

<sup>61</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 659; see also p. 241.

<sup>62</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 10, pp. 120–21. See also Vol. 4, p. 35.

<sup>63</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 7, p. 358.

<sup>64</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 3, pp. 41–42.

sage to George Washington, written in France in 1780. He told Washington how much the latter would enjoy his reputation in France, "pure and free from those little Shades that the Jealousy and Envy of a Man's Countrymen and Cotemporaries are ever endeavouring to cast over living Merit."<sup>65</sup>

Although Franklin himself talked so much about "Common Interests," he could be impatient when others built their arguments on this point. He observed that "it is an Insult on common sense to affect an Appearance of Generosity in a Matter of obvious Interest."<sup>66</sup> This belief in self-interest as a moving force of politics appears with rare clarity in marginal notes in a pamphlet whose author argued that "if the Interests of Great Britain evidently raise and fall with those of the Colonies, then the Parliament of Great Britain will have the same regard for the Colonists as for her own People." Franklin retorted:

All this Argument of the Interest of Britain and the Colonies being the *same* is fallacious and unsatisfactory. Partners in Trade have a *common* Interest, which is the same, the Flourishing of the Partnership Business: But they may moreover have each a *separate* Interest; and in pursuit of that *separate* Interest, one of them may endeavour to impose on the other, may cheat him in the Accounts, may draw to himself more than his Share of the Profits, may put upon the other more than an equal Share of the Burthen. Their having a common Interest is no Security against such Injustice. . . .<sup>67</sup>

#### VI. DEMOCRACY

It is fair to ask how Franklin's views on the above matters square with his avowal of radically democratic notions after 1775. In view of the foregoing, Franklin would not, it seems, agree with the underlying assumptions of Jeffersonian democracy, stated by Jefferson himself: "Nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses . . ." It was also Jefferson who believed "that man was a rational animal, endowed by nature with rights, and with an innate sense of justice."<sup>68</sup> On this faith in the rationality and goodness of man, the theory of Jeffersonian democracy has been erected. Vernon L. Parrington said of Franklin that "he was a forerunner of Jefferson, like him firm in the conviction that government was good in the measure that it remained close to the people."<sup>69</sup> Charles A. Beard, discussing the members of the Federal Convention, tells us that Benjamin Franklin "seems to have entertained a more hopeful view of democracy than any other member of that

<sup>65</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 8, p. 28. Cf. the expression of the same idea 36 years earlier in *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 242.

<sup>66</sup> *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press* (cited in note 55), p. 183.

<sup>67</sup> Marginal comments in *Good Humour, or, A Way with the Colonies* (London, 1766), pp. 26–27. Franklin's copy is in the library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. This comment is reprinted in *A Collection of the Familiar Letters and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston, 1833), p. 229.

<sup>68</sup> Jefferson to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814, and to Judge William Johnson, June 12, 1823, quoted by Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1943), pp. 19, 139.

<sup>69</sup> Vernon L. Parrington, *The Main Currents of American Thought*, 3 vols. (New York, 1930), Vol. 1, pp. 176–77.

famous group.”<sup>70</sup> All this must seem rather strange in view of the none too optimistic conception of human nature which we have found in Franklin. His radically democratic views after 1775—before that time his outlook seemed essentially conservative—baffled contemporary observers as it has later students.

There is, as a matter of fact, plenty of evidence of Franklin’s sincere devotion to monarchy during the greater part of his life. It was the most natural thing for him to assure his friend, the famous Methodist preacher George Whitefield, that a settlement of colonies on the Ohio would be blessed with success “if we undertook it with sincere Regard to . . . the Service of our gracious King, and (which is the same thing) the Publick Good.”<sup>71</sup> Franklin loved to contrast the corruption of Parliament and the virtues of George III. To an American friend, he said that he could “scarcely conceive a King of better Dispositions, of more exemplary virtues, or more truly desirous of promoting the Welfare of all his Subjects.”<sup>72</sup>

Another “conservative” aspect of Franklin which cannot be glossed over lightly is his acceptance of the Puritan and mercantilistic attitude towards the economic problems of the working class. Throughout his life he was critical of the English Poor Laws. He deplored “the proneness of human nature to a life of ease, of freedom from care and labour,” and he considered that laws which “*compel the rich to maintain the poor*” might possibly be “fighting against the order of God and Nature, which perhaps has appointed want and misery as the proper punishments for, and cautions against, as well as necessary consequences of, idleness and extravagance.”<sup>73</sup> This was written in 1753. But as late as 1789, long after he had come out for the political equality of the poor and for a radical theory of property, he still confirmed to an English correspondent that “I have long been of your opinion, that your legal provision for the poor is a very great evil, operating as it does to the encouragement of idleness.”<sup>74</sup>

Franklin’s endorsement of democracy is most emphatically revealed in his advocacy of a unicameral legislature for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as well as for the federal government. The issue of unicameral versus bicameral legislative bodies—an issue much discussed in the latter decades of the eighteenth century—reflected faithfully, as a rule, the clash of views of two different theories of human nature and of politics. The bicameral system was based on the principle of checks and balances; a pessimistic view of human nature naturally would try to forestall the abuse of power in a single and all-powerful as-

<sup>70</sup> Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York, 1913), p. 197.

<sup>71</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 339. See also Vol. 2, pp. 377–78; Vol. 4, pp. 94, 213.

<sup>72</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 5, p. 204. See also Vol. 5, p. 261. Another sign of Franklin’s anti-radical attitude during his stay in England is his disgust with the Wilkes case. See *Writings*, Vol. 5, pp. 121, 133, 134, and 150. Also *Letters and Papers of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Jackson, 1753–1785*, ed. Carl Van Doren (Philadelphia, 1947), p. 139.

<sup>73</sup> *Letters and Papers of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Jackson, op. cit.*, pp. 34, 35.

<sup>74</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 10, p. 64. See for an elaboration of his arguments “On the Labouring Poor,” *Writings*, Vol. 5, pp. 122–27, and “On the Price of Corn, and Management of the Poor,” *Writings*, Vol. 5, pp. 534–39.



sembly. On the other hand, most of those who trusted in the faculties of human reason did not see the necessity for a second chamber to check and harass the activities of a body of reasonable men.

In the case of Franklin, however, this correspondence of political convictions with views on human nature is lacking. He was the president of the Pennsylvania Convention of 1776 which—almost uniquely among the American states—set up a unicameral system. This, of course, filled many of the French *philosophes* with great joy. Franklin, they supposed, had secured a triumph of enlightened principles in the new world. Condorcet, in his “Éloge de Franklin,” had this to say:

Franklin's voice alone decided this last provision. He thought that as enlightenment would naturally make rapid progress, above all in a country to which the revolution had given a new system, one ought to encourage the devices of perfecting legislation, and not to surround them with extrinsic obstacles. . . . The opinion contrary to his stands for that discouraging philosophy which considers error and corruption as the habitual state of societies and the development of virtue and reason as a kind of miracle which one must not expect to make enduring. It was high time that a philosophy both nobler and truer should direct the destiny of mankind, and Franklin was worthy to give the first example of it.<sup>75</sup>

As a matter of fact, it has since been shown that Franklin, who at the time of the Pennsylvania Convention also served in the Continental Congress, played a minor role in the adoption of the unicameral system. The unicameral legislature was rooted in the historical structure of Pennsylvania's proprietary government.<sup>76</sup> This, however, is irrelevant from our point of view, since Franklin endorsed and defended the unicameral system in his “Queries and Remarks respecting Alterations in the Constitution of Pennsylvania,” written in November, 1789.<sup>77</sup>

In the opposition to checks and balances and a second chamber, Franklin's most famous companion was Thomas Paine, author of *The Age of Reason*. This similarity of views between Franklin and one of the most vocal spokesmen of the creed of reason and the perfectibility of man perhaps contributes to the misinterpretation of Franklin's position among the eighteenth-century philosophers. Paine's arguments against the system of checks and balances and for a single house were characteristic of the later Enlightenment:

Freedom is the associate of innocence, not the companion of suspicion. She only requires to be cherished, not to be caged, and to be beloved is, to her, to be protected. Her residence is in the undistinguished multitude of rich and poor, and a partisan to neither is the patroness of all.<sup>78</sup>

This argument, of course, presupposes the rationality and goodness of human nature. We might perhaps agree with Paine that “no man was a better judge of

<sup>75</sup> *Oeuvres de Condorcet* (cited in note 1), Vol. 3, pp. 401–2.

<sup>76</sup> See J. Paul Selsam, *The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776* (Philadelphia, 1926), and Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, 4 vols. (New Haven, 1934–38), Vol. 3, p. 320.

<sup>77</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 10, pp. 54–60.

<sup>78</sup> “A Serious Address to the People of Pennsylvania on the Present Situation of their Affairs” (Dec., 1778), in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 2 vols. (New York, 1945), Vol. 2, p. 284.

human nature than Franklin,"<sup>79</sup> but Paine certainly did not have Franklin's conception of human nature.

The reasons for Franklin's almost radical attitude in 1776 and 1787 appear in his own writings. One thing seems certain: belief in the goodness and the wisdom of the people is *not* at the root of his democratic faith. This idea is quite foreign to Franklin. Discussing the Albany Plan of Union in 1754, he thought that "it is very possible, that this general government might be as well and faithfully administered without the people, as with them."<sup>80</sup> Nor did he fundamentally change his view in the last years of his life. "Popular favour is very precarious, being sometimes *lost* as well as *gained* by good actions." In 1788, he wrote publicly that "popular Opposition to a public Measure is no Proof of its Impropriety."<sup>81</sup> What a strange democrat it was who told the Federal Convention that "there is a natural Inclination in Mankind to kingly Government."<sup>82</sup> The most plausible and popular reason for belief in democracy, then, is eliminated.

On the other hand, Franklin did not believe in the intrinsic goodness of the wealthy or the wisdom of the powerful; he had no liking for aristocratic government, be it by an aristocracy of wealth or an aristocracy of birth. He was scornful of the House of Lords and thought "Hereditary Professors of Mathematics" preferable to hereditary legislators because they could do less mischief.<sup>83</sup>

It is noteworthy that in the whole of Franklin's work only one reference to Montesquieu can be found; and that concerns his ideas on criminal law. Separation of powers, the role of the aristocracy in a healthy society—these are doctrines which never took possession of Franklin's mind.

The antithesis between Adams, under the influence of Harrington, and Franklin, chiefly influenced by his own experience, is remarkably complete. Adams wrote:

It must be remembered that the rich are *people* as well as the poor; that they have rights as well as others; they have as clear and as *sacred* a right to their large property as others have to theirs which is smaller; that oppression to them is as possible and wicked as to others. . . .<sup>84</sup>

Franklin mounts a formidable counterattack:

And why should the upper House, chosen by a Minority, have equal Power with the lower chosen by a majority? Is it supposed that Wisdom is the necessary concomitant of Riches . . . and why is Property to be represented at all? . . . The Combinations of Civil Society

<sup>79</sup> "Constitutional Reform" (1805), *ibid.*, pp. 998–99.

<sup>80</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 231. See also p. 309.

<sup>81</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, pp. 564, 702. In 1788, Franklin repeatedly said that there was at present the "danger of too little obedience in the *governed*," although in general the opposite evil of "giving too much power to our *governors*" was more dreaded. *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 638; and Vol. 10, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 593.

<sup>83</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 6, pp. 370–71. For other attacks on the principle of hereditary honors and privileges, in connection with the Order of the Cincinnati, see *Writings*, Vol. 9, pp. 162, 336.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted by Zoltán Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 36.

are not like those of a Set of Merchants, who club their Property in different Proportions for Building and Freighting a Ship, and may therefore have some Right to Vote in the Disposition of the Voyage in a greater or less Degree according to their respective Contributions; but the important ends of Civil Society, and the personal Securities of Life and Liberty, these remain the same in every member of the Society; and the poorest continues to have an equal Claim to them with the most opulent. . . .<sup>85</sup>

It is this strong objection against the attempt to use—openly or covertly—a second chamber as a tool of class rule which seems to underlie Franklin's disapproval of the bicameral system. Franklin, it should be pointed out, was aware of the necessity and inevitability of poises and counter-poises. This is shown by his attempt, referred to above, to create a sort of balance of passions, checking avarice with ambition. There exist some, though quite rare, allusions to a balance of power concept in his utterances on imperial and international relations. The most pointed and direct reference to the idea of checks and balances, however, may be found in an unpublished letter to a well-known figure of Pennsylvania politics, Joseph Galloway, in 1767. Franklin discussed and welcomed a new Circuit Bill for the judges of Pennsylvania. He suggested and encouraged an increase in the salaries to be granted by the Assembly for the judges to offset the nominating and recalling powers of the Proprietor: "From you they should therefore receive a Salary equal in Influence upon their Minds, to be held during your Pleasure. For where the Beam *is moveable*, it is only by equal Weights in opposite scales that it can possibly be kept even."<sup>86</sup>

Consequently, the arguments of Thomas Paine or the French *philosophes*, which derive their validity from assumptions about the goodness or rationality of human nature, do not hold in the case of Franklin. In a brilliant recent essay it has been suggested that "despite the European flavor of a Jefferson or a Franklin, the Americans refused to join in the great Enlightenment enterprise of shattering the Christian concept of sin, replacing it with an unlimited humanism, and then emerging with an early enterprise as glittering as the heavenly one that had been destroyed."<sup>87</sup> As far as Franklin is concerned, however, the alternatives of Calvinist pessimism and the "unlimited humanism" of the European Enlightenment do not really clarify the essential quality of his political thought. His thought is rooted in a climate of opinion which combined the rejection of the doctrine of original sin with a rather modest view of human nature.

It seems, then, that the desire for equality, rather than any rationalistic concepts, offers the clue to an adequate understanding of those elements in Frank-

<sup>85</sup> "Queries and Remarks . . .," *Writings*, Vol. 10, pp. 58–61. For Franklin's disagreement with the bicameral system of the United States Constitution, see *Writings*, Vol. 9, pp. 645, 674. The paradox of Franklin's attitude is thrown into relief if one considers that even Jefferson, in his *Notes on Virginia*, raised his voice against the dangers of an "elective despotism," and exalted "those benefits" which a "proper complication of principles" would produce. *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York and London, 1904–5), Vol. 4, p. 19.

<sup>86</sup> April 14, 1767, in the William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>87</sup> Louis Hartz, "American Political Thought and the American Revolution," this *REVIEW*, Vol. 46, pp. 321–42, at p. 324 (June, 1952).

lin's political thought which at first sight appear inconsistent with his not too cheerful view of human goodness. His striving for equality also suggests a solution to the thorny problem of reconciling his democratic views after he had decided for American independence with his faithful loyalty to the Crown before that date. The American interest obliged him to fight against Parliament—an aristocratic body in those days—while remaining loyal to the King; in recognizing the King's sovereignty while denying the Parliament's rights over the Colonies, Franklin by necessity was driven into a position which—historically speaking—seemed to contradict his Whig principles. The complaining Americans spoke, as Lord North rightly said, the “language of Toryism.”<sup>88</sup> During the decade before 1775 Franklin fought for the equal rights of England and the Colonies under the Crown. But his desire for equality went deeper than that. In his “Some good Whig Principles,” while conceding that the government of Great Britain ought to be lodged “in the hands of King, Lords of Parliament, and Representatives of the *whole body* of the freemen of this realm,” he took care to affirm that “*every man* of the commonalty (excepting infants, insane persons, and criminals) is, of common right, and by the laws of God, a *freeman*” and that “the poor man has an *equal* right, but *more* need, to have representatives in the legislature than the rich one.”<sup>89</sup> It has not been widely known that Franklin, in a conversation with Benjamin Vaughan, his friend and at the same time emissary of the British Prime Minister Lord Shelburne during the peace negotiations of 1782, has confirmed this view. Vaughan reported to Shelburne that “Dr. Franklin's opinions about *parliaments* are, that people should not be rejected as electors because they are at *present* ignorant”; Franklin thought that “a statesman should meliorate his people,” and Vaughan supposed that Franklin “would put this, among other reasons for extending the privilege of election, that it *would* meliorate them.” It was Franklin's opinion, Vaughan thought, “that the lower people are as we see them, because oppressed; & then their situation in point of manners, becomes the reason for oppressing them.”<sup>90</sup> The fact is that Franklin's overriding concern for equality foreshadows the attacks of the socialism of later generations on the absolute sanctity of private property:

All the Property that is necessary to a Man, for the Conservation of the Individual and the Propagation of the Species, is his natural Right, which none can justly deprive him of: But all Property superfluous to such purposes is the Property of the Publick, who, by their Laws, have created it, and who may therefore by other Laws dispose of it, whenever the Welfare of the Publick shall demand such Disposition.<sup>91</sup>

Franklin's previously quoted speech in the Federal Convention provides us with an essential insight: he expressed belief in “a natural Inclination in Mankind to kingly Government.” His reasons are revealing: “It sometimes relieves

<sup>88</sup> Quoted by G. H. Guttridge, *English Whiggism and the American Revolution* (Berkeley, 1942), p. 62.

<sup>89</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 10, p. 130.

<sup>90</sup> Benjamin Vaughan to Lord Shelburne, November 24, 1782. Benjamin Vaughan Papers in the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. Photostat in the Benjamin Vaughan Collection in the William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>91</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 138 (written in 1783). See also Vol. 10, p. 59.

them from Aristocratic Domination. They had rather one Tyrant than 500. It gives more of the Appearance of Equality among Citizens; and that they like."<sup>92</sup> Equality, then, is not incompatible with monarchy.

From all this a significant conclusion may be drawn. It is an oversimplification to speak of Franklin's "conservatism" before 1775 and of his "radicalism" after 1775. Professor MacIver illustrates the conservative character of the first stage of American political thought preceding the appeal to natural rights by reference to Franklin, who, in spite of his later attacks on the Order of the Cincinnati, "nevertheless clung to the principle of a hereditary, though constitutional monarchy, until the tide of revolution rendered it untenable."<sup>93</sup> The term "conservative" does not do justice to the possibility of paying faithful allegiance to a monarchy and still disliking aristocracies of heredity or wealth. Because of his innate desire for equality, as well as his defense of the American cause against the encroachments of Parliament, Franklin found it much easier to be a monarchist. Monarchy, rather than aristocracy, was compatible with those elements of his thought which after 1775 made him a democrat.

Another of the factors which, while not incompatible with monarchical feelings, contributed greatly to Franklin's acceptance of democracy, is the belief which he shared with Hume that power, in the last analysis, is founded on opinion. "I wish some good Angel would forever whisper in the Ears of your great Men, that Dominion is founded in Opinion, and that if you would preserve your Authority among us, you must preserve the Opinion we us'd to have of your Justice."<sup>94</sup> He thought that "Government must depend for it's Efficiency either on Force or Opinion." Force, however, is not as efficient as Opinion: "Alexander and Caesar. . . received more faithful service, and performed greater actions, by means of the love their soldiers bore them, than they could possibly have done, if, instead of being beloved and respected, they had been hated and feared by those they commanded." Efficiency, then, became an argument for democracy. "Popular elections have their inconvenience in some cases; but in establishing new forms of government, we cannot always obtain what we may think the best; for the prejudices of those concerned, if they cannot be removed, must be in some degree complied with."<sup>95</sup>

It has rarely been noticed how detached Franklin, the greatest champion of democracy in the Federal Convention, was from the problem of the best government. His speech at the conclusion of the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention may give us a clue to the perplexing problem of why he gave comparatively little attention to the theoretical questions of political philosophy and devoted almost all his time to the solution of concrete issues. He stated his disagreement with several points of the Constitution, nevertheless urging general allegiance and loyalty to its principles. Asking his colleagues to doubt a

<sup>92</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 539.

<sup>93</sup> R. M. MacIver, "European Doctrines and the Constitution," in *The Constitution Reconsidered* (cited in note 25), p. 55.

<sup>94</sup> *Letters and Papers of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Jackson* (cited in note 72), p. 145 (written in 1764). See also *Writings*, Vol. 6, p. 129; Vol. 9, p. 608.

<sup>95</sup> *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press* (cited in note 55), p. 193; *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 56; Vol. 3, p. 228. See also Vol. 3, 231; Vol. 5, p. 79.



little their feeling of infallibility, Franklin summed up the experience of his life: "I think a general Government necessary for us, and there is no *form* of government but what may be a blessing to the people, if well administered."<sup>96</sup> Perhaps in speaking these words he was thinking of one of the favorite writers of his younger days, Alexander Pope:

For Forms of Government let fools contest;  
Whate'er is best administer'd is best.<sup>97</sup>

#### VII. THE DUALITY OF FRANKLIN'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

There are two outstanding and sometimes contradictory factors in Franklin's political thought. On the one hand, we find an acute comprehension of the power factor in human nature, and, consequently, in politics. On the other hand, Franklin always during his long life revolted in the name of equality against the imperfections of the existing order. He himself stated the basic antithesis of his political thought: Power versus Equality.

Fortunately, Franklin's notes on the problem at hand have been preserved; they are to be found in his marginal comments to Allen Ramsay's pamphlet, *Thoughts on the Origin and Nature of Government*, which presents the straight view of power politics. Franklin rebelled against the rationalization and justification of the power factor. "The natural weakness of man in a solitary State," Ramsay proclaimed, "prompts him to fly for protection to whoever is able to afford it, that is to some one more powerful, than himself; while the more powerful standing equally in need of his service, readily receives it in return for the protection he gives." Franklin's answer is unequivocal: "*May not Equals unite with Equals for common Purposes?*"<sup>98</sup>

In the last analysis, Franklin looked upon government as the trustee of the people. He had stated this Whig principle in his very first publication as a sixteen-year-old boy<sup>99</sup> and he never deviated from it. So in opposition to Ramsay's doctrine, according to which the governed have no right of control whatsoever, once they have agreed to submit themselves to the sovereign, Franklin declared the accountability of the rulers:

If I appoint a Representative for the express purpose of doing a business for me that is for *my Service* and that of others, & to consider what I am to pay as my Proportion of the Expense necessary for accomplishing that Business, I am then tax'd by my own Consent.— A Number of Persons unite to form a Company for Trade, Expences are necessary, Directors are chosen to do the Business & proportion those Expences. They are paid a Reasonable Consideration for their Trouble. Here is nothing of weak & Strong. Protection on one hand, & Service on the other. The Directors are the Servants, not the Masters; their Duty is prescrib'd, the Powers they have is from the members & returns to them. The Directors are also accountable.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>96</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 9, p. 607.

<sup>97</sup> Pope, "Essay on Man," Epistle 3, *Selected Works* (cited in note 17), p. 124.

<sup>98</sup> [Allen Ramsay], *Thoughts on the Origin and Nature of Government* (London, 1769), p. 10. Franklin's copy in the Jefferson Collection of the Library of Congress. (My italics.)

<sup>99</sup> "Dogood Papers," *Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 26. Cf. *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press* (cited in note 55), p. 140.

<sup>100</sup> Marginal notes to Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

Franklin refused to recognize that power alone could create right. When Ramsay declared that according to nature's laws every man "in Society shall rank himself amongst the Ruling or the Ruled, . . . all Equality and Independence being by the Law of Nature strictly forbidden . . . , " Franklin rejoined indignantly, "I do not find this Strange Law among those of Nature. I doubt it is forged. . . ." He summarized Ramsay's doctrine as meaning that "He that is strongest may do what he pleases with those that are weaker," and commented angrily: "A most Equitable Law of Nature indeed."<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, Franklin's grasp of the realities of power inevitably involved him in moral and logical ambiguities of political decision. At times he expressed the tragic conflict of ethics and politics. Characteristic of the peculiar contradiction within his political thought was this statement three years before the Declaration of Independence on England's prospects in the Anglo-American conflict: "*Power* does not infer *Right*; and, as the *Right* is nothing, and the *Power* (by our Increase) continually diminishing, the one will soon be as insignificant as the *other*."<sup>102</sup> In this instance, obviously, he was trying to make the best of both worlds. But there were times when he was only too well aware of the conflict of these two worlds. In a passage which seems to have escaped the notice of most students of his political thought, Franklin observed that "*moral and political Rights sometimes differ, and sometimes are both subdu'd by Might*."<sup>103</sup>

The measured terms of Franklin's political thinking present a striking contrast to the optimism and rationalism which we usually associate with the Age of Enlightenment. Franklin's insight into the passions of pride and power prevented him from applying the expectation of man's scientific and intellectual progress to the realm of moral matters. To be sure, he would not deny the influence of scientific insights upon politics, and he thought that a great deal of good would result from introducing the enlightened doctrines of free trade and physiocracy into international politics. But Franklin, unlike many of his friends in France, was never inclined to consider these and other ideas as panaceas. The mutual adjustment of interests would always remain the chief remedy of political evils. It was in this domain that reason, as a temper in the conduct of human affairs, made its greatest contribution to his political thought. Moderation and equity, so he had been taught by his experience (rather than by abstract reasoning) were true political wisdom. His belief that the rulers ought to be accountable, together with his more pragmatic conviction that force alone, in the long run, could not solve the great problems of politics, brought forth his declaration of faith that "Government is not establish'd merely by *Power*; there must be maintain'd a general Opinion of its *Wisdom* and *Justice* to make it firm and durable."<sup>104</sup>

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>102</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 6, p. 87.

<sup>103</sup> *Writings*, Vol. 8, p. 304. (My italics.)

<sup>104</sup> *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Carl Van Doren (New York, 1945), pp. 184-85. Cf. *Writings*, Vol. 4, p. 269; Vol. 7, p. 390.