

from  
*The Autobiography*

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

*Moral Perfection*

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

... I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. TEMPERANCE. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. SILENCE. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. ORDER. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.

GUIDE FOR READING

1 *about this time*: the early 1730's, when Franklin was in his twenties.  
2-7 What does Franklin want to accomplish?

9-12 What does Franklin realize?

13 *speculative conviction*: belief.

17 *rectitude*: moral correctness.

18 *contrived*: thought up, devised.

25-50 What do you learn about Franklin from his list of virtues?

28 *trifling conversation*: small talk.

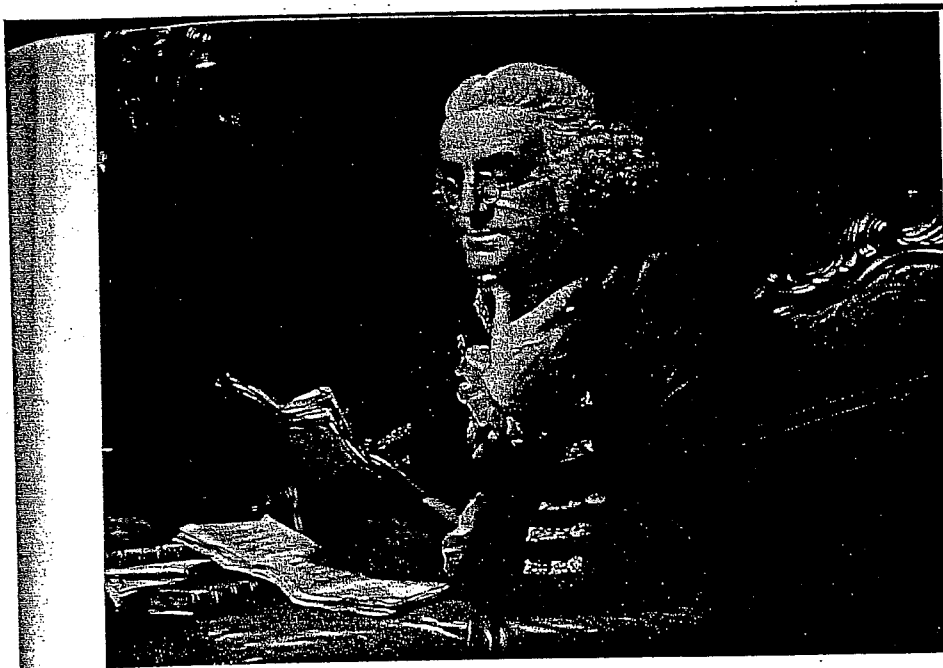
Words

to Know  
and Use

**arduous** (ar' ju: əsk' əd) *adj.* difficult to accomplish

**inclination** (in' klī: nə' shən) *n.* one's customary disposition or tendency

**precept** (prē' sept' s) *n.* a rule of moral conduct or behavior



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN 1767 David Martin © The White House Historical Association, Washington, D.C. Photograph by the National Geographic Society.

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.

35 E 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.

40 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.

45 11. TRANQUILLITY. 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.

50 13. HUMILITY. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

33 *frugality*: thrift.

41 *forbear resenting injuries*: refrain from bitterness toward someone who has offended you.

45 *tranquillity*: peacefulness.

50 *Socrates* (săk' re tēz'): a Greek philosopher who taught clear and reasonable thinking and who devoted himself to seeking truth.

My intention being to acquire the *habitude* of all these virtues. I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone through the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arranged them with that view, as they stand above.

*Temperance* first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, *Silence* would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave *Silence* the second place. This and the next, *Order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. *Resolution*, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues; *Frugality* and *Industry* freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of *Sincerity* and *Justice*, etc., etc. Conceiving then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Golden Verses, daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I ruled each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I crossed these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

51 *habitude* (hab' i too'd'): habit.

52-59 Why does Franklin decide to conquer only one virtue at a time?

60-64 Why does Franklin choose to deal with temperance first?

63 unremitting attraction of ancient habits: constant pull of old habits.

60-78 Why does Franklin choose this particular order for his virtues?

80 *Pythagoras* (pi thag' a ras): a Greek philosopher and mathematician of the sixth century B.C. Although best known for the Pythagorean theorem in geometry, he also wrote verses describing his ideas on ethics and values.

Summarize Franklin's system for attaining perfection.

Words  
to Know  
and Use

facilitate (fa-sil'i-tat') v. to make easier  
affluence (af' loo-ans) n. wealth

TEMPERANCE							
<i>EAT NOT TO DULLNESS; DRINK NOT TO ELEVATION.</i>							
	S.	M.	T.	W.	T.	F.	S.
T.							
S.	•	•		•		•	
O.	••	•	•		•	•	•
R.			•			•	
F.		•			•		
L.			•				
S.							
J.							
M.							
C.							
T.							
C.							
H.							

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

93-114 Franklin's plan is to eliminate one weakness before moving on to the next one. How realistic do you think this is?

105-109 To what is Franklin comparing his method of self-improvement?

Words  
 to Know  
 and Use

**eradicate** (e-rad-ik-ate) v. to uproot, eliminate

made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots, till in the end, by a number of courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination. . . .

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

What do Franklin's method for achieving perfection and his expectation for success reveal about his character?

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

120 I entered upon the execution of this plan for self-examination, and continued it with occasional intermissions for some time. I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish. To avoid the trouble of renewing now and then my little book, which, by scraping out the marks on the paper of old faults to make room for new ones in a new course, became full of holes, I transferred my tables and precepts to the ivory leaves of a memorandum book, on which the lines were drawn with red ink, that made a durable stain, and on those lines I marked my faults with a black-lead pencil, which marks I could easily wipe out with a wet sponge. After a while I went through one course only in a year, and afterward only one in several years, till at length I omitted them entirely, being employed in voyages and business abroad, with a multiplicity of affairs that interfered; but I always carried my little book with me.

135 My scheme of *Order* gave me the most trouble; and I found that, though it might be practicable where a man's business was such as to leave him the disposition of his time, that of a journeyman printer, for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observed by a master, who must mix with the world, and often receive people of business at their own hours. *Order*, too, with regard to places for things, papers, etc., I found extremely difficult to acquire. I had not been early accustomed to it, and, having an exceeding good memory, I was not so sensible of the inconvenience attending want of method. This article, therefore, 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 ax of a smith, my neighbor, desired to have the whole of its surface as bright as the edge. The smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the wheel; he turned, while the smith pressed the broad face of the ax hard and heavily on the stone, which made the turning of it very fatiguing. The man came every now and then from the wheel to see how the work

119 **execution:** carrying out.

131-136 Why does Franklin stop keeping an account of his progress? Why do you think he continues to carry around his little book? P

139 **disposition:** here, management

143 What virtue does Franklin find difficult to acquire? Does this surprise you? R

151-164 What point is Franklin making with this anecdote? T

153 **smith:** a person who makes or repairs metal objects.

**Words  
to Know  
and Use**

vex (vex) v. to annoy  
fatiguing (fə'teɪɡ'ɪŋ) adj. exhausting fatigue v.

160 went on, and at length would take his ax as it was, without farther grinding. "No," said the smith, "turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by-and-by; as yet, it is only speckled." "Yes," says the man, "but I think I like a speckled ax best." And I believe this may have been the case  
 165 with many, who having for want of some such means as I employed found the difficulty of obtaining good and breaking bad habits in other points of vice and virtue, have given up the struggle, and concluded that "a speckled ax was best"; for something that pretended to be reason,  
 170 was every now and then suggesting to me that such extreme nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals, which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and  
 175 that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance.

In truth, I found myself incorrigible with respect to Order; and now I am grown old, and my memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it. But on the whole, though  
 180 I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise  
 w | should have been if I had not attempted it. 22

164-176 What does Franklin think is the problem with being perfect? | u

172 foppery (fäp' er ä): affectedness; contrived perfection.

176 in countenance: calm; composed.

177-183 How successful is Franklin in his attempt to achieve moral perfection? | v

Words  
to Know  
and Use

benevolent (bə-nev' ə-lent) *adj.* inclined to do good; kindly  
 incorrigible (in-kör' ə-jə-bəl) *adj.* that which cannot be corrected or reformed

## Ben Franklin's Virtues

Franklin placed each of the 13 virtues on a separate page in a little book which he carried with him for more than 50 years. Each day he evaluated his performance with regard to each of them. Every week he selected one of the virtues as a point of special focus, concentrating his attention on the selected trait for seven days.

Did Ben Franklin feel that this focus on his governing values was helpful? As he wrote in his autobiography, "I always carried my little book with me . . . and it may be well my posterity should be informed that to this little artifice, with the blessing of God, their ancestor owes the constant felicity of his life down to his seventy-ninth year, in which this is written."

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13. **HUMILITY:** Imitate Jesus and Socrates.