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Notes on Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*

This morning haze obscures the firmament
Sunlight and clouds in serried blue alloy
A narrow clearing opens, fortune sent
I glimpse a sparkling sun beam and feel joy

Stoics praise calm joy without elation
Its motion placid and to reason aligned
When it transports with wanton exultation
It fires the perturbations of the mind

The four disordered passions are emotions
That lack the moderation reason brings
Elation, lust, fear, grief are their commotions
Prudence and temperance are their golden rings

The soul that's tranquil, calm, restrained, at rest
The happy soul, the subject of our quest

One

ORDER

Twelve Virtues and the Pursuit of Happiness

In his early twenties, Benjamin Franklin recalled, “I conceiv’d the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection.” He had been reading some of the classical Greek and Roman philosophers—Pythagoras, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Cicero—as well as scanning the popular magazines of the day for self-help advice to print in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. Based on his reading, he had become convinced that the key to self-improvement was daily self-examination. Accordingly, he devised a spiritual accounting system, drafting a list of twelve virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, and—saving the one he found most challenging for last—chastity. Franklin later expanded his list to thirteen by adding another virtue a Quaker friend told him he needed to work on: humility. He resolved each day to run through a checklist of whether or not he had lived up to each virtue, placing a black mark next to the virtue where he had fallen short. Franklin worried that if word got out about his plan for moral perfection, it might be viewed as “a kind of foppery in morals” that “would make me ridiculous.” (Perhaps he imagined the reaction to a book called “*Humility*, by Benjamin Franklin.”) Daunted by all the black marks, he eventually abandoned the project. But “on the whole,” he concluded, “tho’ 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 should have been if I had not attempted it.”¹

Franklin’s conclusion was that “without Virtue Man can have no Happiness in this World.”² And as the motto for his project, he chose these lines from one of the most widely read books of Stoic self-help philosophy, Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*:

O philosophy, guide of life! O searcher out of virtue and exterminator of vice!
One day spent well and in accordance with thy precepts is worth an
immortality of sin.³

Franklin wrote about his virtue project in his autobiography, and it has been widely imitated ever since. It was admired, for example, by Menachem Mendel Lefin, a Ukrainian rabbi who, in 1808, almost twenty years after Franklin’s death, published *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, or a *Book of Accounting of the Soul*, introducing Franklin’s thirteen virtues to Hebrew readers as the foundation of the Jewish school of Mussar, or character improvement.⁴ I came across Lefin’s book a few years ago on the recommendation of a rabbi, which led to a brief attempt to practice the Franklin system of daily self-accounting with a friend. (Like Franklin, we found the exercise daunting and soon gave up.)

At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, however, I noticed an unexpected connection I hadn’t seen before: Ben Franklin wasn’t the only Founder to cite Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* as a key source for the connection between virtue and happiness. In 1815 Amos J. Cook, the head of a boarding school in Maine, wrote to Thomas Jefferson asking him for some wisdom in Latin to enlighten his students. Although he had no original Latin verses to add, Jefferson wrote, he wanted to offer some “humble prose” from Cicero’s advice manual:

Therefore the man, whoever he is, whose soul is tranquillized by restraint and consistency and who is at peace with himself, so that he neither pines away in distress, nor is broken down by fear, nor consumed with a thirst of longing in

pursuit of some ambition, nor maudlin in the exuberance of meaningless eagerness—he is the wise man of whom we are in quest, he is the happy man.⁵

Praising the passage as “a moral morsel, which our young friends under your tuition should keep ever in their eye,” Jefferson emphasized to Cook the ancient wisdom of Cicero’s philosophy, in words remarkably similar to Franklin’s: “[I]f the Wise, be the happy man, as these sages say, he must be virtuous too; for, without virtue, happiness cannot be.”⁶

In another uncanny synchronicity, Jefferson, like Franklin, was inspired by *Tusculan Disputations* to draft his own list of twelve virtues—he called them “a dozen cannons of conduct in life”—that he believed were key to the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson’s virtues were almost identical to Franklin’s, although he conveniently left chastity off his list, given his children with Sally Hemings, all of whom he held, like her, in bondage. And Jefferson, like Franklin, accompanied his list of virtues with practical maxims about how to follow each one, beginning with industry, which Jefferson reduced to the following: “Never put off to tomorrow what you can do to-day.”⁷ (Franklin’s version was “Lose no time; be always employ’d in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.”)⁸

Intrigued by the fact that Cicero’s now forgotten self-help manual had inspired both Franklin and Jefferson to draft similar lists of twelve virtues for daily living, I decided to read Cicero myself. I then set out to read the other books of ancient wisdom that shaped Jefferson’s original understanding of the famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence about “the pursuit of happiness.”⁹ In 1825, writing to the historian Henry Lee, Jefferson said that the Declaration “was intended to be an expression of the American mind, resting on the harmonising sentiments of the day,” as expressed in conversations, letters, printed essays, and what he called “the elementary books of public right.” He named four authors in particular: Aristotle, Cicero, John Locke, and Algernon Sidney.¹⁰ But who were the other philosophers who influenced Jefferson, and which of their books did he consider most valuable?

A reading list that Jefferson first drafted in 1771, five years before he wrote the Declaration, provided an answer. Jefferson sent the list to his friend Robert

Skipwith, who had asked for books to include in a private library, and revised it over the years. Under the category of “religion,” Jefferson’s reading list includes Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, as well as a top ten list of other works of classical and Enlightenment moral philosophy:¹¹

1. Locke’s *Conduct of the Understanding in the Search of Truth*.
2. Xenophon’s memoirs of Socrates, translated by Sarah Fielding.
3. Epictetus, translated by Elizabeth Carter.
4. Marcus Aurelius, translated by Collins.
5. Seneca, translated by Roger L’Estrange.
6. Cicero’s *Offices*, by Guthrie.
7. Cicero’s *Tusculan questions*.
8. Ld. Bolingbroke’s *Philosophical works*.
9. Hume’s essays.
10. Ld. Kaim’s *Natural religion*.

During the COVID quarantine, I set out to read these ten books, as well as others on Jefferson’s reading list, nearly all of which I had somehow missed. I’ve had the privilege of a wonderful liberal arts education and have studied literature, history, political philosophy, and law with great teachers at great universities. But despite my elaborate education, I’d never encountered the great works of Greek, Roman, and Enlightenment *moral philosophy* that offered guidance about how to live a good life.

In college, I remember yearning for this kind of guidance. The 1980s were the “Greed is good” decade, and I was looking for an alternative to the unchecked hedonism and materialism celebrated by popular culture. Unconvinced by the rigors of Puritan theology, which I had been studying as an English major, I craved an answer to the question of whether spiritual and moral truth could be obtained by reason rather than revelation, by good works and reflection rather than blind faith. What I didn’t realize, because classical moral philosophy had fallen out of the core curriculum, was that this was precisely the question the ancient philosophers had set out to answer. These texts were an essential part of the curriculum of American high school, college, and law students in the

eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, but were no longer considered central to what educated Americans should know by the time I graduated from college and law school. It was this gap in my education that led to my quarantine reading project.

Inspired by Jefferson's daily reading schedule, I got up every morning before sunrise, read a selection from his list, and found myself taking notes on the reading in sonnet form, so that I could easily remember the daily lesson. (This practice seemed unusual, to say the least, until I discovered that many readers in the founding era also wrote poems summarizing the wisdom of these classic texts, including Ben Franklin, Mercy Otis Warren, Phillis Wheatley, Alexander Hamilton, and John Quincy Adams.) I've included some of these sonnets as brief introductions to the chapters that follow, along with ten of the most cited books on Jefferson's reading list in the appendix,¹² in the hope that you may be inspired to work your way through the list yourself.

What I learned in my year of daily reading between March 2020 and March 2021 came as a revelation. Scholars have debated for centuries about which books most influenced Jefferson when he wrote the Declaration, but surprisingly few of them focus on the original meaning of "the pursuit of happiness."¹³ The best-known books on the Declaration interpret that phrase as a substitute for the right to own property and make little reference to the influence of the classical authors.¹⁴ But when I read the books of moral philosophy on Jefferson's reading list, I found that the similarities were far more important than the differences. With the help of electronic word searches, I was surprised to discover that many of the books contain the phrase that appears in the Declaration: "the pursuit of happiness." And many cite the same source for their conclusion about the original meaning of the pursuit of happiness: Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*.

In addition to these surprises, working my way through Jefferson's reading list changed my understanding of the famous phrase. Today we think of happiness as the pursuit of pleasure. But classical and Enlightenment thinkers defined happiness as the pursuit of virtue—as *being* good, rather than *feeling* good. For this reason, the Founders believed that the quest for happiness is a

daily practice, requiring mental and spiritual self-discipline, as well as mindfulness and rigorous time management. At its core, the Founders viewed the pursuit of happiness as a lifelong quest for character improvement, where we use our powers of reason to moderate our unproductive emotions so that we can be our best selves and serve others. For the Founders, happiness required the daily cultivation of virtue, which the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith defined as “the temper of mind which constitutes the excellent and praiseworthy character.”¹⁵ If you had to sum it up in one sentence, the classical definition of the pursuit of happiness meant being a lifelong learner, with a commitment to practicing the daily habits that lead to character improvement, self-mastery, flourishing, and growth. Understood in these terms, happiness is always something to be pursued rather than obtained—a quest rather than a destination. “The mere search for higher happiness,” Cicero wrote, “not merely its actual attainment, is a prize beyond all human wealth or honor or physical pleasure.”¹⁶

Why was Cicero’s self-help book such a key text in influencing the Founders’ understanding of happiness? Because it offered a popular summary of the core of Stoic philosophy. To achieve freedom, tranquility, and happiness, according to the ancient Stoics, we should stop trying to control external events and instead focus on controlling the only things that we have the power to control: namely, our own thoughts, desires, emotions, and actions. In this sense, Stoic philosophy has many similarities with the Eastern wisdom traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism. “Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think,” said the Buddha in the Dhammapada, emphasizing the need to master our selfish impulses—including envy, arrogance, anger, and the pursuit of short-term pleasure—in order to achieve lasting well-being.¹⁷ The Hindu wisdom literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, sums up a similar teaching on happiness in a phrase often quoted by Mahatma Gandhi: “Renounce and enjoy.”¹⁸ In other words, only by renouncing selfish attachments to the results of our actions, only by acting selflessly, can we conquer our ego-based emotions—including anger, fear, and jealousy—live in

the present, and “live according to nature,” as the Stoics put it, in harmony with the natural laws of the universe.

John Adams was excited to learn that Pythagoras, one of the founders of Greek moral philosophy, was said to have studied with the Hindu masters during his travels in the East,¹⁹ and in his correspondence with Thomas Jefferson at the end of their long lives, Adams discussed the Hindu Vedas as a possible source of the ancient wisdom regarding happiness. For the Founders, the pursuit of happiness included reading in the wisdom traditions of the East and West, always anchored by the canonical text of the Bible, in an attempt to distill their common wisdom about the need to achieve self-mastery through emotional and spiritual self-discipline.

The Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonia*, meaning “good daimon,” or good spirit, and the Greek word for virtue is *arete*, which also means “excellence.” In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously defined happiness as virtue itself, an “activity of soul in conformity with excellence.”²⁰ These terms are confusing to us, because excellence and virtue aren’t self-defining. For this reason, although *eudaimonia* is hard to translate, it might be rendered as “human flourishing,” “a purpose-driven life,” or, in modern terms, “being your best self.” The Latin word for virtue is “virtus,” which also means valor, manliness, excellence, and good character. What Cicero and Franklin called “virtue,” therefore, might be translated as “good character.” Today, modern social psychologists use terms like “emotional intelligence,” which they define as “the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict.”²¹

What I also learned from reading Cicero and the other ancient sources is that the Founders framed their quest for self-regulation and emotional intelligence through a psychological lens: the dramatic struggle between reason and passion. The Greek words for reason and emotion are *logos* and *pathos*, so for the Founders, *passion* was a synonym for emotion. The Founders didn’t mean we should lack emotion; only that we should manage our emotions in productive ways. Cicero traces the distinction between reason and passion back to

Pythagoras, who divided the soul into two parts: the rational and irrational. Pythagoras further divided the irrational parts of the soul into the passions and the desires, leading his disciples to suggest a three-part division of the soul: reason, passion, and desire. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato popularized Pythagoras's three-part division with his metaphor of a charioteer, representing reason, driving a chariot pulled by two horses. One horse, representing the passionate part of the soul, careened toward earthly pleasures; the other, representing the noble or intelligent part of the soul, inclined upward toward the divine. The goal of the charioteer was to use reason to align the noble and passionate horses so that both pulled in the same direction.²²

In his writings on happiness, Plato argued that we should use our faculty of reason, located in the head, to moderate and temper our faculties of passion, located near the heart, and appetite, in the stomach. When all three faculties of the soul were in harmony, Plato maintained, the state that resulted was called “temperance,” but, as Adam Smith noted, it might be better translated as “good temper, or sobriety and moderation of mind.”²³ (The Latin word “temperantia,” or temperance, also means good temper, sobriety, and self-control; therefore, for the classical writers, virtue, or good character, was synonymous with temperance, or self-control.) Plato's theory of the harmony of the soul became the basis for the “faculty psychology” that was developed by Enlightenment philosophers such as Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century and that was at the core of the Founders' education. Faculty psychology held that the mind is separated into different mental powers, or faculties, including the intellect, the emotion, and the will. According to this view, the goal of education was to strengthen the intellect, or reason, so that it could moderate and control the will and the emotions in order to achieve the self-control that was key to happiness. Faculty psychology drew on Cicero's idea that we are born with certain innate faculties, including a moral sense, that could aid our powers of reason in calming our emotions. “[W]e must keep ourselves free from every disturbing emotion,” Cicero wrote in his treatise *On Duties*, “not only from desire and fear, but also from excessive pain and pleasure, and from anger, so that we may enjoy that calm of soul and freedom from care.”

In their private letters and diaries, public speeches and poems, the Founders talked constantly about their own struggles to control their tempers and to be their best selves by using reason to regulate their selfish passions. “Men are rather reasoning tha[n] reasonable animals, for the most part governed by the impulse of passion,” Alexander Hamilton wrote in 1802.²⁴ John Adams’s wife, Abigail, gave similar advice to their son, John Quincy Adams. “The due Government of the passions has been considered in all ages as a most valuable acquisition,” she warned,²⁵ emphasizing in particular the importance of subduing “the passion of Anger.” Her conclusion: “Having once obtained this self government you will find a foundation laid for happiness to yourself and usefullness to Mankind.”²⁶

Nearer to our time, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg told me that her mother gave her precisely the same Stoic advice. “[E]motions like anger, remorse, and jealousy are not productive,” she said. “They will not accomplish anything, so you must keep them under control.”²⁷

Ben Franklin summed up the classical understanding of happiness as a balance between reason and passion in his 1735 essay “On True Happiness.” “The desire of happiness in general is so natural to us, that all the world are in pursuit of it,” he wrote in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. “Reason represents things to us not only as they are at present, but as they are in their whole nature and tendency; passion only regards them in the former light.” Franklin concluded that we need to use our powers of reason to check our immediate emotions and desires so that we can achieve the harmony of the soul that allows us to flourish, emphasizing that “all true happiness, as all that is truly beautiful, can only result from order.”

In his virtues project, Franklin defined *order* in terms of impulse control: “Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.” And, in emphasizing the importance of delaying short-term gratification for long-term character improvement, Franklin was summarizing the essence of the ancient wisdom. The classical authorities viewed the pursuit of happiness as a daily version of the famous marshmallow test, an experiment on delayed gratification conducted at Stanford in 1972. Researchers gave the subjects, who were children, a choice between one immediate reward (such as a marshmallow)

or two rewards for those who could wait fifteen minutes to receive them. The study found that children who were able to wait for two marshmallows rather than eating one immediately performed better in school years later and had better life outcomes.

Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, is the leading source for how words were understood in the founding era. Johnson notes an older definition of *happiness* as "good luck or fortune," stemming from the Old English word *hap*. But his principal definition of happiness is "Felicity; state in which the desires are satisfied."²⁸ To illustrate the definition, Johnson cites a text that also appears in Franklin's autobiography and on Jefferson's reading list: namely, John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Johnson's selection comes from book 2, chapter 21, "Of Power," which repeatedly uses the phrase "pursuit of happiness."²⁹ And Locke's point, which he takes from Cicero, is that we should control our desires through calm deliberation so that we come to realize that our true and substantial happiness will best be served by long-term self-regulation rather than short-term gratification.

In the course of working my way through Thomas Jefferson's reading list, I discovered that, throughout American history, the meaning of the pursuit of happiness has evolved in unexpected ways. The ancient wisdom that defined happiness as self-mastery, emotional self-regulation, tranquility of mind, and the quest for self-improvement was distilled in the works of Cicero, summed up by Franklin in his thirteen virtues, and used by Adams in his "Thoughts on Government." After Jefferson inscribed the idea in the Declaration of Independence, it showed up in *The Federalist Papers*, the essays Madison and Hamilton wrote in support of the Constitution, focusing on the promotion of public happiness. It was evoked by Presidents John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln, as well as by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, to defend the ideal of self-reliance and to advocate for the destruction of slavery. It became the basis of Alexis de Tocqueville's idea of "self-interest properly understood" and of Justice Louis Brandeis's idea of freedom of conscience. The ancient wisdom fell out of fashion in the 1960s and in the "Me Decade" that followed, however, when our understanding about the pursuit of happiness was

transformed from being good to feeling good. But the classical ideal of happiness was resurrected and confirmed in the 1990s by insights from social psychology and cognitive behavior therapy, which found that we can best achieve emotional intelligence by developing habits of emotional self-regulation—training ourselves to turn negative thoughts and emotions into positive ones—through the power of the imagination.

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After reading the books that shaped the Founders’ original understanding of the pursuit of happiness, I set out to explore how they applied the ancient wisdom in their own lives. What I learned changed the way I thought about the psychology of the Founders and, in particular, about their use of time. The Founders talked incessantly about their struggles for self-improvement and their efforts to regulate their anxieties, emotions, and perturbations of the mind. They tried to calm their anxieties through the daily practice of the habits of mindfulness and time management. Aristotle said that good character comes from the cultivation of habits, and it’s remarkable how much time and energy many of the leading members of the founding generation devoted to their own lifelong quests to practice the habits that would improve their character. They took seriously the Pythagorean injunction to use every hour of the day to cultivate their minds and bodies. They created disciplined schedules for reading, writing, and exercise, and they kept daily accounts of their successes and failures in living up to the ideals they found in the books of ancient wisdom, trying to use each moment productively by living in the present with calm but intense purpose and focus. The Founders may not have meditated, but they practiced the habits of mindfulness.

At times, of course, the Founders shamefully betrayed the moral ideals they set for themselves. Some of them spent their lives as enslavers and notoriously denied the humanity, equality, and inalienable rights of those they enslaved. At least some of the enslaving Founders were aware of their own hypocrisies. Jefferson and other enslavers from Virginia recognized that it was craven greed—following Cicero, they called it avarice—that kept them from freeing those they held in bondage, even as they called for the “total emancipation” of all enslaved

people in the future. In other words, they denounced slavery as a violation of the self-evident truth that all men (by which they meant all individuals) are created equal, but in their more self-aware moments acknowledged that they were too dependent on the lifestyle slavery afforded them to consider the consequences of giving it up.

In March 1775, weeks before war broke out at Lexington and Concord, Thomas Jefferson listened as the Virginia delegate Patrick Henry urged the Second Virginia Convention to send troops to support the Revolution. In his famous “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” speech, Henry quoted Joseph Addison’s play *Cato: A Tragedy* about the need to choose freedom over slavery. “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?” he asked. “Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”³⁰ How could Henry justify urging white Americans to throw off what he called the chains of British slavery while he himself continued to enslave Black Americans? He didn’t even try. Henry considered it “amazing” that he and his fellow Americans, who were so “fond of Liberty,” also allowed slavery, a practice “as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible and destructive to liberty.” And Henry admitted that it was avarice that made him choose not to follow his moral principles: “Would any one believe that I am Master of Slaves of my own purchase!” Henry asked. “I am drawn along by [the] general inconvenience of living without them. I will not—I cannot justify it.”³¹

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In addition to changing the way I thought about the Founders, my reading also changed the way I thought about how to be a good citizen. Following the classical and Enlightenment philosophers, the Founders believed that *personal* self-government was necessary for *political* self-government. In their view, the key to a healthy republic begins with how we address our own flaws and commit to becoming better citizens over time. In *The Federalist Papers*, Madison and Hamilton made clear that the Constitution was designed to foster deliberation so that citizens could avoid retreating into the angry mobs and partisan factions that can be inflamed by demagogues. Ancient Athens had fallen because the

demagogue Cleon had seduced the Athenian assembly into continuing the war with the Peloponnesian League; Rome had fallen because the people were corrupted by Caesar, who offered them luxury in exchange for liberty. Only by governing their selfish emotions as individuals could citizens avoid degenerating into selfish factions that threatened the common good. The way for citizens to create a more perfect union, the Founders insisted, was to govern themselves in private as well as in public, cultivating the same personal deliberation, moderation, and harmony in our own minds that we strive to maintain in the constitution of the state. Madison would have urged us to think more and tweet less.

In this sense, the Founders believed that the pursuit of happiness regards freedom not as boundless liberty to do whatever feels good in the moment but as bounded liberty to make wise choices that will help us best develop our capacities and talents over the course of our lives. They believed that the pursuit of happiness includes responsibilities as well as rights—the responsibility to limit ourselves, restrain ourselves, and master ourselves, so that we achieve the wisdom and harmony that are necessary for true freedom.

“Obviously freedom must carry with it the meaning of freedom to limit oneself,” the composer Leonard Bernstein said of Beethoven’s choice of a single note in his *Eroica* Symphony. “Freedom is not infinite, not boundless liberty, as some hippies like to think—do anything you want, anytime, anywhere you want to. No, freedom isn’t that. It means being free to make decisions, to determine one’s own course.” Bernstein went on to connect Beethoven’s struggle to balance freedom and harmony in the symphony with the same freedom of citizens to govern themselves in a democracy. “In Beethoven, as in democracy, freedom is a discipline, combining the right to choose freely, with the gift of choosing wisely.”³²

Citing Cicero’s famous analogy between “harmony in song” and “concord in the State,” John Adams, too, compared the harmony of a well-tempered state constitution to the harmony of a well-tempered orchestra.³³ “As the treble, the tenor, and the bass exist in nature, they will be heard in the concert,” Adams wrote in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. “[I]f they are arranged by Handel, in a skilful composition, they

produce rapture the most exquisite that harmony can excite; but if they are confused together, without order, they will ‘Rend with tremendous sound your ears asunder.’”³⁴ This was the classical understanding of the pursuit of happiness: the freedom to make daily choices about how to balance emotion and reason that lead to truth, order, harmony, and wisdom, aligned with the divine will or the natural harmonies of the universe. The Founders understood the importance of our spiritual nature, and for many of them, the pursuit of happiness was a spiritual quest.

This book is an attempt to travel into the minds of the Founders, to understand their quest for the good life on their own terms. By reading the books they read and following their own daily attempts at self-accounting, we can better understand the largely forgotten core of their moral and political philosophy: that moderating emotions is the secret of tranquility of mind; that tranquility of mind is the secret of happiness; that daily habits are the secret of self-improvement; and that personal self-government is the secret of political self-government. It’s not a surprise that the Founders often fell short of their own ideals of moral perfection. But what is a surprise is the seriousness with which they took the quest, on a daily basis, to become more perfect. In his autobiography, Franklin called the great moral errors of his life “errata,” or printers’ errors.³⁵ And he remained hopeful, as he wrote in an epitaph he drafted for himself, that life was like a manuscript whose errors, in a “new & more perfect edition,” could always be “Corrected and amended By the Author.”³⁶

Notes on Plato's *Phaedrus*

Our souls are forged of three-part composite
A charioteer and pair of winged steeds
One horse is noble temper's reposit
The other, seeking pleasure, passion leads

The driver's task: both horses to align
Transporting soul to immortal realm of truth
The noble steed soars up to the divine
The vain and haughty steed careens to earth

Approaching love, the chariot gyrates
The shameless steed propelled by fierce desire
The driver pulls his reins and remonstrates
The lovers meet in reason's sacred fire

When temperance tames passion's base alloys
Two lovers merge in happy equipoise

Two

TEMPERANCE

Ben Franklin's Quest for Moral Perfection

At the age of seventy-nine, Ben Franklin attributed the “constant felicity of his life” to his daily practice of the classical virtues:

To Temperance he ascribes his long-continued health, and what is still left to him of a good constitution; to Industry and Frugality, the early easiness of his circumstances and acquisition of his fortune, with all that knowledge that enabled him to be a useful citizen, and obtained for him some degree of reputation among the learned; to Sincerity and Justice, the confidence of his country, and the honorable employments it conferred upon him; and to the joint influence of the whole mass of virtues, even in the imperfect state he was able to acquire them, all that evenness of temper, and that cheerfulness in conversation, which makes his company still sought for and agreeable even to his younger acquaintances.¹

It's remarkable that Franklin attributed the happiness of his long life to his “evenness of temper” rather than his public accomplishments. For at the time, he had become one of the most famous men on the planet. When he met Voltaire in Paris in 1778, the French hailed him as “the illustrious and wise Franklin, the man of all America most to be respected.”² His electric rod brought lightning from the heavens, his charting of the Gulf Stream changed the course of

international travel, and his experiments with fire warmed homes around the world. In his adopted city of Philadelphia, his influence continues to be felt from block to block in the range of institutions he created, all within walking distance of one another: the Library Company, the American Philosophical Society, the University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Hospital, and the Union Fire Company, known as Franklin's "bucket brigade." As if this wasn't enough, he was America's leading diplomat and practical politician, whose conciliating temper proved to be crucial in the drafting of both the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.

Franklin conducted his first electricity experiments in 1752, the same year he drafted a plan of union for the colonies to pursue common policies for security and defense. During nearly twenty years in London, as an agent for Pennsylvania and other colonies, he invented the glass armonica and urged the repeal of the Stamp Act, the British tax on American newspapers that helped to spark the Revolution. Returning to America in 1775 after being hauled before Parliament for leaking letters about the agitation in Massachusetts, he was elected postmaster general and then served on the committee of five that drafted the Declaration of Independence. After the British defeat at Yorktown in 1781, he returned to Europe, where he negotiated the peace treaty with England, served as America's first ambassador to France, and invented bifocals. Returning to the United States in 1785, he served as president of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council and as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and also found time to invent the mechanical "long arm" for removing books from shelves. Before he died in 1790 at the age of eighty-four, he became president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

Of course, Franklin's self-accounting at the end of his life is necessarily selective. Although he acknowledges the "imperfect state" in which he achieved the classical virtues, he doesn't dwell on those that he famously failed to achieve—in particular, chastity. He fathered an illegitimate son, William, while he was courting Deborah Read, who became his common-law wife. He then all but abandoned Deborah, who remained in Philadelphia during his long diplomatic stints in London and Paris, where he at least flirted with a succession of young admirers. Order was another challenge for Franklin: John Adams was shocked

by his colleague's disorganized schedule when they served as peace commissioners in Paris. And Franklin's clashes with Adams, even if they were provoked mostly by Adams's envy, suggest that Franklin's efforts to achieve humility remained a work in progress. Still, Franklin's "evenness of temper" makes him the most relatable Founder: he acknowledged the limits of his own wisdom and remained until the end of his life willing to change his mind—most notably about slavery, which he had initially tolerated but came to oppose. In this sense, Franklin deployed his youthful lessons in self-control, temperance, and emotional intelligence to remain a lifelong learner, disarming conflicts through humor, not seeking sole credit, and always acknowledging the legitimacy of other points of view while recognizing the limits of his own.

Franklin's conciliating temperament came in part from his parents. His father, Josiah Franklin, an artisan and silk dyer, was a Presbyterian Whig dissenter who, in 1683, fled political and religious oppression in England under the Catholic-leaning monarchy of Charles II for America and liberty. In his memoirs, Franklin described his father as a "mechanical genius" whose "great excellence lay in a sound understanding and solid judgment in prudential matters" and who was "frequently chosen an arbitrator between contending parties."³ His mother, Abiah, was said to have been a "very sensible woman" who taught him practical habits of self-control in daily life. For example, when a female relative gave Franklin unexpected spending money, and he used all of it to buy a whistle from a street vendor, Abiah explained to her son that he could have bought twenty for the price and advised him that, whenever he wanted anything in the future, he should ask himself, "[H]ow much is the whistle worth?" Franklin told the French physiologist Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis that he never forgot the lesson and, since then, had never entertained a violent passion ("violent désir") for anything without repeating it to himself.⁴

But Franklin also attributed his even temper to his attempt in his twenties to practice the classical virtues. He found the task more difficult than he had imagined because the classical philosophers disagreed about how to define the virtues in question. "Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our

avarice and ambition.” Franklin proposed, for the sake of clarity, to list more virtues, with fewer ideas attached to each, and initially came up with his list of twelve:

1. Temperance
Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. Silence
Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. Order
Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. Resolution
Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. Frugality
Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. Industry
Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. Sincerity
Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
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, cloaths, or habitation.
11. Tranquillity
Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity

Rarely use vengery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.⁵

When a Quaker friend informed him that people thought of him as proud and overbearing, Franklin realized that he had neglected an important virtue. Accordingly, he wrote, "I added *Humility* to my list," along with the two most inspiring models of perfection he could imagine:

13. Humility

Imitate Jesus and Socrates.⁶

Always practical, Franklin decided to focus on improving one virtue a week for thirteen weeks, to avoid distracting himself with multitasking. He made a little self-accounting book, and on each page, he drew a grid with seven vertical columns—one for each day of the week. These were crossed by thirteen horizontal columns—one for each virtue. Each night, he resolved to put a "little black spot" in the daily box allotted to the virtue he was focusing on, if he decided he had fallen short of it.⁷

FORM OF THE PAGES.

TEMPERANCE.

Eat not to dulness : drink not to elevation.

	Sun.	M.	T.	W.	Th.	F.	S.
Tem.							
Sil.	*	*		*		*	
Ord.	*	*			*	*	*
Res.		*				*	
Fru.		*				*	
Ind.			*				
Sinc.							
Jus.							
Mod.							
Clea.							
Tran.							
Chas.							
Hum.							

I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every the least offence against *Temperance* ; leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first

Franklin decided to begin with temperance, “as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up.” Then he planned to move on to silence—in order to develop listening skills and to break his habit of “prattling, punning, and joking,” which got him into trouble in social conversation. Next came order, which he “expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies.” In the spirit of order, he created an hourly schedule for maximum productivity:

5:00 to 7:00 a.m., rise, breakfast, and focus on the resolution of the day.

8:00 to 11:00 a.m., work.

Noon to 1:00 p.m., read, dine, and review accounts.

2:00 to 5:00 p.m., work.

6:00 to 9:00 p.m., put things in their place, supper, music, diversion, conversation, examination of the day.

10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., sleep.⁸

Franklin soon found that his twenty-four-hour plan for maintaining order tripped him up. It might be practical to use every hour productively when he was master of his own time as a journeyman printer, but he could hardly keep up his schedule of work and reflection when he had to report to a boss, mix in the world, and receive business clients on their own schedules. He also found it hard to acquire order “with regard to places for things, papers, etc.,” owing to his early habits of being disorganized. He made so little progress in improving his organizational skills that he eventually gave up.⁹

Even after he abandoned his daily self-accounting, Franklin continued in his twenties to devise practical projects to help him and his friends practice the classical virtues. In 1727, he recalled in his *Autobiography*, he formed a “club of mutual improvement which we called the Junto.” (The word means “to join.”) The rules he drafted “required that every member in his turn should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss’d by the company.”¹⁰ Franklin’s standing queries for the Junto

included: “What unhappy effects of intemperance have you lately observed or heard? of imprudence? of passion? or of any other vice or folly?” “What happy effects of temperance? of prudence? of moderation? or of any other virtue?”¹¹ Franklin took these questions almost word for word from an essay by John Locke (which he neglected to cite) proposing the “Rules of a Society,” where members would meet once a week “for their improvement in useful knowledge, and for the promoting of truth and christian charity.”¹²

• • •

Franklin hoped that the model for the Junto would spread, convincing young men to form local chapters for the practice and promotion of virtue. He proposed that members of the Junto and its spinoffs would eventually be known as “*The Society of the Free and Easy*: free, as being, by the general practice and habit of the virtues free from the dominion of vice; and particularly by the practice of industry and frugality, free from debt.”¹³ He also conceived of what he called a “*great and extensive project* that required the whole man to execute”—namely, the formation of “a United Party for Virtue” that would bring together the “virtuous and good men of all nations into a regular body, to be govern’d by suitable good and wise rules.” Franklin proposed to write a practical self-help book called *The Art of Virtue*, which would have “shown the means and manner of obtaining virtue” through daily practice, demonstrating that it was in “every one’s interest to be virtuous who wish’d to be happy even in this world.”

What books in particular focused Franklin on the connection between the pursuit of virtue and the pursuit of happiness? The memoir of Franklin’s friend George Cabanis provides the most extensive testimony reflecting Franklin’s own account of the books he found most influential in his youth. “Before he left his father’s home, he happened on a few volumes by Plutarch,” an ancient Roman biographer who chronicled the *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, including Cicero and Caesar. “[H]e read them ravenously,” Cabanis wrote. “Nothing ever impressed him more than the simple and grand manner, the wise and generous philosophy of that writer, except perhaps for the exquisite good sense and the, as it were, more familiar virtue of Socrates, who is depicted so vividly by Xenophon

in his *Memorabilia*.¹⁴ As young men, most of the Founders were inspired by Plutarch's *Lives*, which compared and contrasted pairs of heroic characters from Greek and Roman history as examples of how to live a good life.

According to Cabanis, Franklin's reading of the classical moral philosophers influenced not only his worldview but also his diet and daily habits. In his autobiography, which he began in 1771, Franklin wrote that he had been converted to vegetarianism around the age of sixteen after reading a combination cookbook and self-help manual written by the Baptist preacher Thomas Tryon. Franklin took some of the aphorisms for his list of virtues from Tryon, who was also the author of *Pythagoras's Mystick Philosophy Revised*.¹⁵ According to Cabanis, however, Franklin said he was actually converted to vegetarianism after reading Plutarch's treatise "On the Eating of Flesh."¹⁶ (Plutarch's treatise explains Pythagoras's objection to eating meat on the grounds that we have a moral obligation "to act justly toward other creatures.")¹⁷ When Franklin's mother learned that some "mad philosopher" had converted him to vegetarianism, she declared, according to Cabanis, "There is little harm done; it teaches him self-control."¹⁸ Franklin said later that he abandoned his strict vegetarianism after smelling fried cod while becalmed off of Block Island during his first trip away from Boston. If fish eat one another, why shouldn't we eat fish? he concluded, joking that men find a reason to justify everything they're inclined to do anyway.¹⁹

Despite falling short of Pythagoras's vegetarian injunctions, Franklin, in his autobiography, said that Pythagoras's *Golden Verses* convinced him that daily self-examination was necessary for moral improvement.²⁰ And a fictional 1758 letter from "Father Abraham, to his beloved son," which some have attributed to Franklin, also recommends Pythagoras's method of daily self-examination. "[F]or the Acquirement of solid, uniform, steady Virtue, nothing contributes more, than a daily strict SELF-EXAMINATION," Father Abraham wrote. "This Method is very antient. 'Twas recommended by Pythagoras, in his truly *Golden Verses*, and practised since in every Age, with Success, by Men of all Religions." The letter then quoted from *The Golden Verses's* suggestion of a daily practice of self-accounting before bed, recommending the 1707 translation by Nicholas

Rowe, the English poet and playwright who is considered the first editor of the works of William Shakespeare:

*Let not the stealing God of Sleep surprize,
Nor creep in Slumbers on thy weary Eyes,
Ere ev'ry Action of the former Day,
Strictly thou dost, and righteously survey.
With Rev'rence at thy own Tribunal stand,
And answer justly to thy own Demand.
Where have I been? In what have I transgrest?
What Good or Ill has this Day's Life exprest?*²¹

To understand the philosophical sources that inspired Franklin's understanding of self-accounting as the secret of happiness, therefore, let's begin with Pythagoras. Known as "the fair-haired Samian," Pythagoras was born, according to tradition, on the Greek Island of Samos around 580 BC. His father, Mnesarchus, was a ring maker; his mother changed her name to Pythais, after Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, prophesied that she would bear a son who would "exceed all men that ever were in Beauty and Wisdom, and through the whole course of his life bring much benefit to mankind." Some philosophers held that the god Apollo was his real father. Pythagoras was renowned in his youth for his beauty, as well as for his temperance and prudence, and his "sweet inimitable serenity."²² At the age of eighteen, he left Samos to study astronomy, geometry, and the divine mysteries with the highest spiritual authorities of the East. Tradition holds that he may have studied with the priests of Egypt at Memphis and Thebes, the magi of Persia, the rabbis of Babylon, the Brahmans of India, and the oracles of Delphi, Sparta, and Crete.

Based on his travels, Pythagoras was said by his biographer Iamblichus to be the first to name the study of philosophy, which he defined as "[a] longing and love of wisdom." The philosophy he developed distilled the universal truths now recognized by the Eastern and Western wisdom traditions: through the daily discipline of mastering our thoughts, we can learn to resemble divinity itself. As Pythagoras taught, "[A] man must be made good, then a God."²³

. . .

After about twenty-two years in Egypt and twelve years in Babylon, he returned to the island of Samos around the age of fifty-six and then set off for the city of Croton in southern Italy. There he established an academy to train his disciples to live like gods by cultivating the virtues of self-discipline, self-mastery, and mindfulness. He taught them by example to live as he did: sleeping and eating little, and abstaining from wine and meat. The Roman poet Ovid, in his famous account of Pythagoras in book 15 of the *Metamorphoses*, relates his speech to his disciples on the importance of vegetarianism: “O Mortals! from your Fellow’s Blood abstain, / Nor taint your Bodies with a Food profane.”²⁴ His most peculiar injunction was that his disciples should rather die than eat or touch beans. According to Iamblichus, forty devoted Pythagoreans allowed themselves to be slaughtered in a bean field, because to escape, they would have had to trample on the beans. The enemy commander, a tyrant named Dionysius, offered to spare the life of the pregnant wife of one of the few survivors if she answered one question: “Why [do] your companions cho[o]se rather to die, than to tread on beans?”²⁵ Instead of disclosing Pythagoras’s secret, she bit off her tongue and spit it at him. According to Thomas Stanley’s *History of Philosophy*, published in 1687, the consensus among philosophers is that Pythagoras forbade beans because of their resemblance to fetuses. “Pliny says he condemned beans, because the souls of dead are in them”; Porphyry emphasized the fact that they looked like living creatures; and Cicero said, “[I]t was because beans disturb the tranquility of mind.”²⁶

In addition to rigorous vegetarianism (with a ban on beans), Pythagoras taught by example, with his extraordinary self-discipline of body and mind. He gave speeches to the people of Crotona emphasizing the importance of overcoming unproductive emotions such as anger, jealousy, and fear by the daily practice of temperance and moderation. He told the children of Crotona, in M. Dacier’s 1707 translation of the *Life of Pythagoras*, “that Hardships and Difficulties contribute more to Virtue than Ease and Pleasure; that the drowsiness and insensibility of the Soul are near a-kin to Death; that all the

Passions of the Soul are more cruel than Tyrants, and the enemies of our Happiness.”²⁷

Pythagoras’s disciples distilled his philosophy into seventy-one easily understood *Golden Verses*, which emphasize the importance of disciplining our thoughts by using reason to modulate our passions. Here is a selection:

*By use thy stronger Appetites asswage,
Thy Gluttony, thy Sloath, thy Lust, thy Rage:
From each dishonest Act of Shame forbear;
Of others, and thy self, alike beware.
Let Rev’rence of thy self thy Thoughts controul,
And guard the sacred Temple of thy Soul.*²⁸

Pythagoras’s injunction “Reverence Thyself” was so influential that the Founders quoted it frequently, although sometimes they forgot its source. In 1783 Abigail Adams wrote to a close family friend extolling “the maxim of Epictetus or Pythagoras, I forget which, ‘Reverence thyself.’”²⁹ John Adams left out the source entirely when he wrote to the Massachusetts Founder Rufus King in 1786: “Reverence thyself, is a Prœcept of private Morality, but it is equally applicable And equally necessary to States & Individuals.”³⁰ And in 1760, as we will see, Adams, too, would resolve in his diary to make a mental accounting each evening of his daily vices and virtues, as recommended by Pythagoras’s *Golden Verses*.

The way to practice self-reverence, Pythagoras told his disciples, was to exercise physical as well as mental self-discipline. Self-reverence required thinking before you speak and deliberating before you act. It also required cultivating body and mind through exercise, temperance, and, of course, vegetarianism. Pythagoras emphasized the importance of moderation in all things—diet, lifestyle, speech, thought, and action. He summed this up in his axiom of the golden mean: “Seek not in needless Luxury to waste / Thy Wealth and Substance, with a Spendthrift’s Haste.... / Distant alike from each, to neither lean / But ever keep the happy GOLDEN MEAN.”³¹ By daily examination and

moderation of our thoughts and actions, he concluded, we can realize that we bear within our own minds the keys to our own happiness—or misery.

In addition to *Golden Verses*, Franklin encountered Pythagoras in the works of Plutarch, who discusses Pythagoras in his *Life of Numa*, which Franklin read as a child. Plutarch's most extensive discussion of Pythagorean philosophy is in his *Moralia*, or moral works, which contain the treatise on vegetarianism that Franklin told Cabanis he'd also read. Regardless of exactly where and when Franklin absorbed Pythagorean philosophy, he incorporated its essential elements into the "proposals and queries" he set in 1732 for the Junto, with the Pythagorean injunction "Let all your observations be committed to writing every Night before you go to Sleep." His queries focused on the connection between the pursuit of virtue and happiness. "[O]f the many Schemes of Living which are in our Power to pursue," Franklin asked, "which will be most probably conducive to our Happiness"?³²

. . .

If Pythagoras inspired Franklin to pursue happiness by disciplining his body and his thoughts, Socrates gave him another model for improving his soul. "There was nobody he wanted to resemble more than Socrates," Cabanis said of Franklin. "Xenophon's *Memorabilia* of Socrates had made the strongest impression on him: the simplicity and moderation, the subtlety and the common sense of that philosopher, particularly suited his way of feeling and of seeing things."³³ Xenophon emphasizes Socrates's habits of living and self-control, which inspired others to develop habits of self-mastery. And Xenophon expresses surprise that Socrates could have been condemned for corrupting the youth with his impiety, since "in control of his own passions and appetites, he was the strictest of men."³⁴ Book 1 of the *Memorabilia* quotes Socrates's discourse to his disciples on the importance of self-control. "Should not every man hold self-control to be the foundation of all virtue, and first lay this foundation firmly in his soul?" he asks.³⁵

Franklin took from Socrates a model for how to achieve moral perfection through emotional self-regulation. As Franklin recalled in his autobiography, his

early moral essays, written for the Junto and published later, included “a Socratic dialogue, tending to prove that, whatever might be his parts and abilities, a vicious man could not properly be called a man of sense; and a discourse on self-denial, showing that virtue was not secure till its practice became a habitude, and was free from the opposition of contrary inclinations.”³⁶ In trying to imitate Socrates, Franklin also worked to master the art of conversation, emphasizing the importance of dialogue as a way of seeing all sides of a question and winning his points through gentle persuasion rather than slashing debate. He was so fond of speaking and writing in Socratic dialogues that, years later, when the daughter of one of his English friends was reading Xenophon’s *Life of Socrates*, she cried out, “Mamma, Socrates talks just like Dr. Franklin!”³⁷

After he resolved to imitate Socrates, Franklin decided to avoid direct assertions of his own opinions or to contradict the opinions of others. “I even forbid myself, agreeably to the old laws of our Junto, the use of every word or expression in the language that imported a fix’d opinion, such as *certainly*, *undoubtedly*, etc., and I adopted, instead of them, *I conceive*, *I apprehend*, or *I imagine* a thing to be so or so; or it *so appears to me at present*,” he recalled. This modest way of proposing his opinions initially required effort, since it went contrary to Franklin’s natural inclinations, but it eventually became “so easy, and so habitual to me, that perhaps for these fifty years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical expression escape me.” Franklin found that when he offered his opinions gently, they were more likely to be accepted: “And to this habit (after my character of integrity) I think it principally owing that I had early so much weight with my fellow-citizens when I proposed new institutions, or alterations in the old.”³⁸

In addition to classical authors such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plutarch, and Cicero, young Franklin was influenced by the *Spectator*, a weekly London magazine that helped popularize those authors for an eighteenth-century audience. George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison were all avid fans. According to Cabanis, John “Locke taught [Franklin] how to think; the *Spectator* taught him how to write.”³⁹ Indeed, Franklin recalled in his autobiography that, after his father indentured him in his teens to serve as an

apprentice to his brother James, who had set up a printing shop in Boston, he taught himself to write by reading moral essays from the *Spectator*, setting them aside, and then reconstructing them from memory. Working early in the morning or after his work at the printing house, he would turn the essays into verse and then, after he had forgotten the originals, turn his rhyming versions back into prose. “By comparing my work afterwards with the original, I discovered my faults and amended them,” he wrote.⁴⁰ Sometimes he even fancied that he had improved on the prose of Joseph Addison, who cofounded the *Spectator* with his friend Richard Steele in 1711.

An essayist, poet, politician, and dramatist, Addison wrote the play *Cato*, based on the last days of Cato the Younger and his resistance to the tyranny of Caesar. Franklin and George Washington greatly admired the play, arguably the most influential drama of the American Revolution. (In addition to Patrick Henry’s rallying cry “Give me liberty or give me death,” it also inspired the patriot Nathan Hale’s last words, “I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.”) Franklin used an excerpt from the play as an epigraph for his virtues project, along with his quotation from Cicero. Addison was also a classicist who translated the Greek and Roman moral philosophers. His goal in founding the *Spectator*, he announced in one of the first issues, was “to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality.” Addison proposed to free readers from partisan hatreds and set them down the path to self-improvement, with “Writings as tend to the wearing out of Ignorance, Passion, and Prejudice.”⁴¹

The *Spectator*, in other words, was the antithesis of social media. Most of the weekly essays began with a quotation in Latin from a Roman poet or philosopher to emphasize the weekly lesson about moderating the passions. *Spectator* No. 408, published on June 18, 1712, features a special guest columnist, the poet Alexander Pope, who begins with a Latin quotation from Cicero: “We should keep our passions from being exalted above measure, or severely depressed.” He then sums up the essence of the civic republican creed: “The Actions of Men follow their Passions as naturally as Light does Heat, or as any other Effect flows from its Cause; reason must be employed in adjusting the Passions, but they must ever remain the Principles of Action.”⁴² At the same

time, the *Spectator* warned of the difficulty of subduing reason with passion. “Reason should govern Passion, but instead of that, you see, it is too often subservient to it,” Richard Steele wrote in *Spectator* No. 6.⁴³

In his own *Spectator* essays, Addison returned repeatedly to the classical idea that the soul has higher and lower faculties or powers, and we need to strengthen our higher faculties of reason and prudence so that they can control our lower faculties of pleasure seeking and desire. *Spectator* No. 624, published on November 24, 1714, uses the phrase “the pursuit of happiness.” “Mankind is divided into two Parts, the Busie and the Idle,” Addison writes. “The Busie World may be divided into the Virtuous and the Vicious. The Vicious again into the Covetous, the Ambitious, and the Sensual. The idle Part of Mankind are in a State inferior to any one of these.” All the rest—namely, the virtuous and the busy—“are engaged in the Pursuit of Happiness.”⁴⁴ Franklin relied on the style, the sensibility, and the content of the *Spectator* in composing columns under a series of pseudonyms he invented for himself as a journeyman printer. He wrote as “Silence Dogood” for his brother James’s newspaper, the *New-England Courant*; as the “Busy Body” for the *American Weekly Mercury*, and, most famously, as “Richard Saunders” for *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. Many of Franklin’s essays, like Addison’s, began with a Latin quotation from Cicero, Virgil, or Horace, and then a morality tale illustrating the connection between the pursuit of virtue and the pursuit of happiness. Franklin followed the *Spectator* in emphasizing the need to use reason to subdue passion. “If *Passion* drives, let *Reason* hold the reins,” he wrote in *Poor Richard’s Almanack*.⁴⁵

When Franklin founded the *Almanack* in 1732, he reprinted aphorisms from English anthologies of moral maxims, such as the clergyman Thomas Fuller’s 1726 compilation *Directions, Counsels, and Cautions Tending to Prudent Management in Affairs of Common Life*. Fuller begins with a Pythagorean introduction exhorting his son to read and reflect on each of the numbered maxims in the book, drawn from “the Wisdom of the Antients and Moderns,” to jot down in a memorandum book the ones that strike him as useful, and to set aside time each day to meditate on the maxims in turn. By applying the

maxims in his daily life, Fuller tells his son, he cannot fail of being “*Wise and Good, Useful and Happy*.”⁴⁶

Franklin took Fuller’s maxims and, in many cases, improved them. The most famous of the Poor Richard aphorisms, for example, is “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”⁴⁷ This is Franklin’s snappier version of Fuller’s more lugubrious maxim number 1325: “Use thy self to rise and go to bed early. This may seem like a frivolous Precept, because it respects such common Matters; but if it be well observed, it will contribute very much toward the rendering of a Life long, useful and happy.”⁴⁸ And it represents a shift in emphasis from Fuller’s classical and Christian notion—that virtue is its own reward—toward Franklin’s American notion that self-improvement and self-discipline will also lead to health and wealth.

What was the connection between Franklin’s philosophical and spiritual journeys? In addition to Cicero, he chose as a motto for his virtues project what he called a verse from “the Proverbs of Solomon, speaking of wisdom or virtue: ‘Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.’”⁴⁹ Cabanis writes that when Franklin read these lines, it “was like a ray of light to him. So, it depends on man if he lives long and acquires enough wealth to be happy! He determined to be a living example of this proverb, on both counts.”⁵⁰

Cabanis understates the significance of the “ray of light” that Franklin found in the Book of Proverbs—namely, that happiness depends on our own virtuous works and deeds, and not simply on faith in God’s saving grace. In Franklin’s youth, the debate over whether salvation could be achieved by good works or faith alone was the central theological dispute in England and America. Franklin was born in Boston in 1706, at a time when the old Puritan dogmas were still vigorously enforced from the pulpit of the Second Church in Boston, presided over by Increase Mather and his son Cotton. Following Puritan orthodoxy, the Mathers insisted that all human beings are predestined by God for heaven or for hell. Predestination meant that your ultimate fate was sealed by God at birth, and your salvation could come not by your good works but only by your faith in God’s saving grace. Even a lifetime of faith and good works couldn’t save you if

God had chosen to assign you to hell rather than heaven. Franklin recalls reading in his father's library Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good*, a stern self-help manual that ties itself in knots trying to explain why people should devote themselves to a life of virtuous self-improvement, given the fact that our ultimate fate is predestined by God, regardless of our good works on earth. The basic idea was that, since "good works follow, they do not precede justification," devoting yourself to a life of good works could be viewed as reassuring evidence that you had already been predestined by God for ultimate salvation.

Franklin found this theological hair splitting unconvincing, and he made his debut as a journalist with a series of essays mocking Mather. The satire was triggered by a controversy over vaccinations. In 1721 Boston had been seized by a smallpox epidemic, and the city was divided about whether or not to inoculate healthy people with a small bit of pus from infected people. Mather, whose wife and three children had earlier succumbed to measles, was pro-inoculation. He had learned about the treatment from Onesimus, a Black man he held in bondage, who had been successfully inoculated several years earlier.⁵¹ Once smallpox returned to Boston, Mather and other members of the educated elite became enthusiastic proponents, reflecting the best scientific evidence arriving from Britain, where Queen Caroline was also a supporter. In ridiculing Mather, Franklin, who was a scientific provincial at the time, sided with the eighteenth-century equivalent of anti-vaxxers.

. . .

In August 1721, at the height of the smallpox epidemic, James began publishing the *New-England Courant*, which ran a series of essays attacking the Mathers, Harvard, the clergy, and the Boston elite for their pro-inoculation sympathies. Benjamin Franklin recalled hearing his brothers' friends discussing their work at James's printing shop; under a pseudonym, he submitted an essay introducing himself as a self-educated orphan who had lost both of her parents after immigrating from London. The pseudonym he chose, Silence Dogood, was a cruel mockery of Cotton Mather, who had just published a sermon called "Silentarius," or "The Silent Sufferer," mourning the loss of his newborn daughter to smallpox. "Dogood" was an allusion to Mather's book *Bonifacius*,

whose English title was *Essays to Do Good*.⁵² The satire became even more biting as Silence Dogood revealed herself in subsequent essays to be a lusty widow who consorted with prostitutes and may have been one herself.

Although he never owned up to the pseudonym during his lifetime, Franklin seems to have felt abashed by his youthful ridicule of Cotton Mather. Years later, in 1784, he wrote an appeasing letter to Samuel Mather praising the “Vigour” and “Usefulness” of his father’s sermons. Franklin also recalled some advice about the dangers of pride that Cotton Mather gave him in 1723, exhorting him to “Stoop! Stoop!” as he was taking his leave through a narrow passage with a low ceiling beam. “Not immediately understanding what he meant, I hit my Head hard against the Beam. He then added, *Let this be a Caution to you not always to hold your Head so high; Stoop, young Man, stoop—as you go through the World—and you’ll miss many hard Thumps.*”⁵³ The story seems like a gracious attempt by an older and wiser Franklin to apologize for his youthful arrogance. But it in no way signaled Franklin’s acquiescence to Mather’s unbending Puritan theology.

In fact, at the time of his encounter with Mather, Franklin was moving in the opposite direction. As he told Cabanis, he had been reading “a few good English authors” on the connection between virtue and happiness: John Locke; the Earl of Shaftsbury; and Anthony Collins’s *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, published in 1713.⁵⁴ A friend of Locke, Collins attacked superstition, religious dogma, and the King James Bible, arguing that there was no reason to believe the literal truth of the New Testament, since its authors repeatedly misquoted passages from the Old Testament or selectively quoted them out of context. (Thomas Paine, the pamphleteer of the Revolution, would later make the same argument in *The Age of Reason*, enumerating the selective quotations so relentlessly that Jefferson advised him not to publish.) Collins praised ancient philosophers such as Cicero and Seneca for recognizing that happiness can be obtained only by virtuous living according to the dictates of reason and conscience, rather than by blind faith.

According to Cabanis, Franklin “was so shaken by his reading of Collins that he undertook to discuss all the questions of dogma in short essays.”⁵⁵ In 1725,

Franklin published a few copies of an essay called “A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain,” which he wrote in response to the Anglican cleric William Wollaston’s *The Religion of Nature Delineated*. Wollaston argued that morality can be discerned without relying on the authority of revealed religion, because moral good is the affirmation of a true proposition and moral evil its denial. As a result, he wrote, “natural religion... in its truest definition is: ‘The pursuit of happiness by the practice of reason and truth.’”⁵⁶ (Franklin may have typeset the phrase “the pursuit of happiness” when he helped to print a new edition of the book in the 1720s.) At the same time, Wollaston wrote, both religious and moral truths could be deduced by “right reason,” like Euclid’s mathematical axioms. Unconvinced by some of Wollaston’s arguments about the “self-evident” compatibility of reason and religion, Franklin questioned the immortality of souls, the possibility of free will to choose virtue or vice, and the claim that a providential God rewards virtue and punishes evil.⁵⁷ Knowingly or not, he had reached the same conclusion that Collins expressed to the American educator Samuel Johnson on another occasion: that because all human actions are determined by fate and necessity, there is no possibility of a providential, interventionist God.⁵⁸ Franklin came to regard this essay, he wrote in his *Autobiography*, as one of the “errata of my life,”⁵⁹ and Cabanis says that in “question[ing] the foundation of morals,” Franklin “quickly acknowledged that he had been wrong.” As Cabanis put it, “Few Philosophers are as certain as he was of the existence of an intelligent being who animates the universe.... As for practical morality, he constantly repeated that it was the only reasonable choice for individual happiness as well as the only guarantee of general happiness.”⁶⁰

We don’t know precisely what persuaded Franklin to return to his original idea that individuals are free to choose to live virtuous lives, which will be rewarded (but not predestined) by the Creator, in this life or the next. But by 1728, he had composed for his own private use a prayer to the Deity he called his “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion,” which included the following statement of first principles: “I BELIEVE there is one Supreme most perfect Being, Author and Father of the Gods themselves,” Franklin wrote. “Next to the Praise due, to his Wisdom, I believe he is pleased and delights in the Happiness

of those he has created; and since without Virtue Man can have no Happiness in this World, I firmly believe he delights to see me Virtuous, because he is pleas'd when he sees me Happy."⁶¹ And by 1731, he had composed the following creed to be preached by his proposed United Party for Virtue, containing, in his view, "the essentials of every known religion":⁶²

That there is one God Father of the Universe.

That he [is] infinitely good, Powerful and wise.

That he is omnipresent.

That he ought to be worshipped, by Adoration Prayer and Thanksgiving both in publick and private.

That he loves such of his Creatures as love and do good to others: and will reward them either in this World or hereafter.

That Men's Minds do not die with their Bodies, but are made more happy or miserable after this Life according to their Actions.

That Virtuous Men ought to league together to strengthen the Interest of Virtue, in the World: and so strengthen themselves in Virtue.

That Knowledge and Learning is to be cultivated, and Ignnorance dissipated.

That none but the Virtuous are wise.

That Man's Perfection is in Virtue.⁶³

Franklin's mature views about the connection between virtue and happiness were also deeply influenced by the sermons of John Tillotson, whom he first encountered in Boston. Tillotson was the spiritual mentor of Franklin's local preacher, Ebenezer Pemberton, who became pastor of the Old South Meeting House in 1707. Rejecting Cotton Mather's harsh insistence that faith alone could save, Pemberton quoted, often verbatim, from Tillotson's collected sermons, which were published in London the same year.

Tillotson, who served as archbishop of Canterbury under the joint monarchs William and Mary, was for nearly a century the most popular preacher in England and America.⁶⁴ Franklin later recommended his sermons as models of moral instruction for American youth.⁶⁵ And the young John Adams, as a Harvard student in 1758 preparing for the ministry, spent many days

transcribing the works of Tillotson.⁶⁶ He was the leader of the English latitudinarians, ministers who insisted that virtuous conduct, rather than rigid adherence to religious dogma, was the most prudent way of pursuing human happiness. A word search for “pursuit of happiness” in the 1707 edition of Tillotson’s collected sermons reveals the following passage: “And this error every man commits, who pursues happiness by following his own inclination, and gratifying his irregular desires.”⁶⁷

As the scholar Jacob Blosser has argued, Tillotson’s sermons repeatedly stressed the practical benefits on earth of “virtuous happiness.”⁶⁸ Following classical wisdom, Tillotson maintained that “[t]he capacity and Foundation of all Felicity must be laid in the inward Frame of our Minds.”⁶⁹ And, in a practical theme that Franklin popularized, Tillotson insisted that practicing virtue would make men healthy, wealthy, and wise. Getting angry and losing your temper, by contrast, would ruin your health and reputation, and earn you the contempt of others.

. . .

In 1751 Franklin set out to devise a curriculum for the Academy of Philadelphia, which would evolve forty years later into the University of Pennsylvania. Unlike the other founding trustees of the academy, who wanted to emphasize purely classical studies in Greek and Latin, Franklin preferred moral instruction rooted in the classics with a practical twist, so that students could apply the teachings of Cicero and Seneca to their daily lives. He found the answer in a minister, philosopher, and educator named Samuel Johnson. One of the first tutors at Yale College, Johnson would go on to become the first president of King’s College, which became Columbia University. And Johnson, more than any other American philosopher of his time, helped to popularize the phrase “pursuit of happiness.”

Unlike the British essayist Dr. Samuel Johnson, with whom he was often confused, the American Samuel Johnson belonged to a group of Yale faculty members who had been expelled from the college during the “great apostasy” of 1722, when they embraced the Episcopalian, rather than Presbyterian, policy on

ordination into the Church. (The doctrinal details aren't important for our purposes, except that they led Johnson and his fellow apostates to travel to London, where they were warmly welcomed into the Church of England.) His life was changed in 1714, the year of his Yale graduation, by "a well chosen library of new books" sent to Yale from England by the royal agent for the colony. "He had then all at once the vast pleasure of reading the works of our best English poets, philosophers and divines," Johnson recalled, such as William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Locke, and Isaac Newton, as well as the sermons of liberal clergymen such as Tillotson. "All this was a flood of day to his low state of mind," and allowed him to reject the rigid Calvinism of his youth in favor of an emphasis on John Locke's reason and Francis Bacon's empiricism.⁷⁰

On his return to America, Johnson continued his missionary work, spreading the doctrine of liberal Anglicanism rather than orthodox Puritanism in his pamphlets and sermons. And he worked to complete the philosophical treatise he had begun while an undergraduate at Yale: an attempt to synthesize all the doctrines of human knowledge by combining classical learning with the new insights of the Enlightenment. In 1729 Johnson met and befriended Bishop George Berkeley, the famous British idealist philosopher who argued that reality consists only of the mind and its ideas, and that we can know only our ideas about material objects, not the objects themselves. (The British Samuel Johnson famously responded to Berkeley's claim by kicking a large stone and declaring, "I refute him thus.") Berkeley had settled in Rhode Island while awaiting money from the British Crown to establish a college in Bermuda to educate the colonists. The money never arrived, and so Berkeley returned to England. But he continued to advise the American Samuel Johnson, who inscribed in his own hand a quotation from Berkeley on the title page of his *Elementa Philosophica*, which Benjamin Franklin first printed in 1752.⁷¹

Johnson's book, which he called "a new system of morality," was the first philosophy textbook published in America. And it closely follows William Wollaston's definition of "the pursuit of happiness" as aligning our thoughts and actions with the self-evident moral and spiritual truths of the universe, all of which are accessible by reason. Johnson's definition of "the Religion of Nature," which he calls morality itself, is identical to Wollaston's: "the pursuit of our true

happiness by thinking, affecting and acting, according to the laws of truth and right reason.”⁷² To emphasize the connection, Franklin’s 1752 printing of Johnson’s textbook includes a prayer from Wollaston.

Franklin not only printed the textbook but also became its enthusiastic champion. In 1750, as Franklin was founding the Academy of Philadelphia, he invited Johnson to be its first professor of moral philosophy.⁷³ The following year, he sent Johnson a draft curriculum adopting his textbook as its centerpiece. “Dr. Johnson’s *Ethices Elementa*, or first Principles of Morality, may now be read by the Scholars, and explain’d by the Master, to lay a solid Foundation of Virtue and Piety in their Minds,” Franklin wrote.⁷⁴

In 1753 Franklin traveled to Connecticut to meet with Johnson, accompanied by William Smith, a Scottish educational reformer. They discussed their joint project of creating “new model” colleges that would teach Johnson’s nondenominational moral philosophy in English, rather than Calvinist theology in Latin and Greek. Soon after, Johnson became the first president of King’s College in New York City, and Smith became the first president of the College of Philadelphia, both of which used Johnson’s textbook. According to Neil C. Olsen, about half the college graduates in America between 1743 and 1776 were taught a version of Johnson’s nondenominational moral philosophy (with the other half taught orthodox Calvinist theology),⁷⁵ and more than half of the men who contributed to the Continental Congress that passed the Declaration of Independence were connected in some way to Johnson’s, Franklin’s, and Smith’s “practical idealism, as taught in their new model American colleges.”⁷⁶

In addition to serving as a kind of moral textbook for the American Revolution, Johnson’s book is a practical how-to manual for what he repeatedly calls “the pursuit of happiness.” He begins his *Introduction to Philosophy* with the following definition, which might have been written by Aristotle or the Stoics: “Philosophy is the study of truth and wisdom... in the pursuit of true happiness.”⁷⁷ After following the classical division of philosophy into three branches—rational, natural, and moral—he then defines the practical branch of moral philosophy as “the art of pursuing our highest happiness by the universal practice of virtue.”⁷⁸

Johnson wrote the sections on governing the passions as a kind of advice manual to his son, William Samuel Johnson, a Founding Father who served in the first Continental Congress, signed the Constitution as a delegate from Connecticut, and succeeded his father as president of King's College. Children, Samuel Johnson writes, "should, from the beginning, be taught and inured to the practice of self-denial, and the moderation and restraint of their appetites and passions."⁷⁹ The particular mental faculties we can deploy are our "powers of reason and conscience," to ensure "that they might preside over our passions." Johnson equates our powers of reason with our innate moral sense, or intuitive sense of right or wrong, which gives us not only the right but the duty "of seeking and persuing our own preservation and well-being or happiness" by thinking and acting according to the laws of truth and reason.⁸⁰ Like Wollaston and the Stoics, in other words, Johnson defined the pursuit of happiness as thinking and acting according to the laws of truth and reason, aligning our lives with God, nature, and reason itself.

Johnson recited the standard Stoic wisdom that virtue is the only true path to happiness. "God's glory must consist in our pursuing our own happiness"⁸¹ by avoiding sin and following the path of virtue, he writes. He enumerated a series of duties that we owe to ourselves, "which are called Human Virtues, and may be comprehended under the general term, temperance, or a right government of all my powers, appetites and passions." We can fulfill these duties, Johnson stresses, by cultivating the individual virtues of prudence, moderation, sobriety, chastity, meekness, patience, fortitude, contentment, frugality, and industry.⁸² (This covers most of the virtues on Franklin's list.)

Johnson also emphasized the importance of controlling our "ruling passion," borrowing a phrase from Alexander Pope, who introduced the idea of a "ruling passion" in his widely read poem "An Essay on Man."⁸³ According to Pope, each person has a ruling passion that explains the inconsistency in our conduct by allowing our self-love to conquer our powers of reason. And in his *Reflections on Courtship and Marriage* (1746), Franklin had quoted Pope's famous couplet as a warning against allowing the "love of money" to be our ruling passion when we choose a mate:

*The ruling Passion, be it what it will,
The ruling Passion conquers Reason still.*⁸⁴

Samuel Johnson's moral textbook wasn't his last word on the pursuit of happiness. Around 1764, he published a fictional dialogue, or "Rhapsody," called *Raphael, or the Genius of the English America*. An angel called Raphael, representing "the guardian or genius of New England," visits a philosopher called Aristocles, representing Johnson.⁸⁵ (Aristocles of Messene had attempted to synthesize all of Greek moral philosophy.) Raphael helpfully reminds Aristocles that "[t]he natural obligation to virtue is founded in the necessity that God and nature lays under us to desire and pursue our own happiness."⁸⁶

In their most inspiring joint venture, Johnson and Franklin worked together to extend their educational philosophy of self-improvement to Black as well as white students. The project represented a significant evolution in Franklin's thinking on the question of equal rights for all. Franklin arrived in London in 1757 with two enslaved men—Peter and King—and had initially maintained that education for Black people, which he supported, could never make them the intellectual equals of whites. But in 1760 he was elected to the Bray Society, founded by a British clergyman committed to educating Black people in the American colonies. With funding from the society, Franklin helped to establish schools for the education of Black youth in Williamsburg, Virginia, Newport, Rhode Island, and New York City, and he appointed the American Samuel Johnson to run the New York school.⁸⁷ When Franklin returned to America, he visited the school in Philadelphia and was favorably impressed. "I was on the whole much pleas'd, and from what I then saw, have conceiv'd a higher Opinion of the natural Capacities of the black Race than I had ever before entertained," he wrote to the secretary of the Bray Society in London. "Their Apprehension seems as quick, their Memory as strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of white Children." After the visit, Franklin vowed, "I will not undertake to justify all my Prejudices, nor to account for them."⁸⁸

By 1781, Franklin's household no longer included enslaved labor. In 1787, the year of the Constitutional Convention, he accepted the presidency of the Philadelphia Society for the Abolition of Slavery, founded by Quaker

abolitionists, and sought public support for a plan to educate and employ “those who have been restored to freedom,” with the goal of promoting “the public good and the happiness of these our hitherto too much neglected fellow-creatures.”⁸⁹ And in February 1790, two months before his death, Franklin forwarded an antislavery petition to the First Congress, at the very beginning of the American experiment. “That mankind are all formed by the same Almighty being, alike objects of his Care & equally designed for the Enjoyment of Happiness,” the Petition begins, invoking the language of the Declaration of Independence, “the Christian Religion teaches us to believe, & the Political Creed of America fully coincides with the Position.” The petition then quotes the language of the preamble to the Constitution, insisting that “*the blessings of liberty... ought rightfully to be administered, without distinction of Colour, to all descriptions of People.*” It concludes by calling on Congress to “countenance the *Restoration of liberty* to those unhappy Men, who alone, in this land of Freedom, are degraded into perpetual Bondage,” in the process “removing this *Inconsistency from the Character of the American People.*”⁹⁰ For the mature Franklin, it was obvious that the promise of the Declaration—that all men are equally entitled to the pursuit of happiness—meant what it said.

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In 1757, three years after he published Johnson’s textbook, Franklin drafted a last will and testament. He divided the bulk of his estate, including his library, his house on Market Street, the income from his printing business, and his share in the Library Company of Philadelphia among his wife, Deborah, his son, William, and his daughter, Sarah, each of whom received £1,000. There were smaller bequests to his sister Jane Mecom and her son Benjamin, as well as some unexpected beneficiaries. (“My Electrical Apparatus I give to Yale College at New-haven in Connecticut.”) Most strikingly, however, Franklin concluded by thanking God for giving him “a Mind, with moderate Passions” to which he attributed his happiness and success in overcoming “Ambition, Avarice and Superstition, common Causes of much Uneasiness to Men.”⁹¹

This “evenness of temper,” as he called it in his *Autobiography*, proved to be crucial in allowing Franklin to play the role of moderator and conciliator

throughout a series of important diplomatic assignments: in London before the American Revolution and in Paris after it. His judgment, of course, sometimes failed him: in 1774, during his service as a colonial agent to London, he rashly publicized letters that he had somehow obtained between the royal governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, and Lieutenant Governor Andrew Oliver, suggesting a conspiracy to deprive the colonists of their liberties. Franklin was hauled before the British Privy Council to justify his actions and was humiliated in a slashing public cross-examination by the king's solicitor general. The experience radicalized Franklin and led him to return to America in a revolutionary spirit. He was soon elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress, where he would serve, with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence.

Franklin overcame his youthful overconfidence, however, and expressed his humility in his final speech to the Constitutional Convention on September 17, 1787. “[T]he older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others,” he emphasized. Although “there are several parts of this Constitution which I do not at present approve,” Franklin confessed, in his long life, he had “experienced many instances of being obliged by better information” to change his opinions. It was amazing, he said, to find the proposed Constitution “approaching so near to perfection as it does.”⁹²

He closed by emphasizing the connection between the happiness of the people and the virtue of the government. “Much of the strength & efficiency of any Government in procuring and securing happiness to the people, depends on opinion, on the general opinion of the goodness of the Government, as well as of the wisdom and integrity of its governors.” And he hoped that all the delegates would sign the Constitution despite any reservations, in the spirit of humility. “On the whole, Sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility—and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.”⁹³ In Franklin's final appeal for humility at the Constitutional Convention, he connected the Declaration's

promise of private happiness with the Constitution's promise of public happiness.

When he called on each of his fellow delegates to “doubt a little of his own infallibility,” Franklin may have had in mind one Founder with whom he clashed more openly than any other: John Adams. Although Adams was not at the convention (he was on diplomatic duty in London while Jefferson was in Paris), Franklin had called him, in one of history's more memorable put-downs, “[a]lways an honest man, often a great one, but sometimes absolutely mad.”⁹⁴ After serving on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence, Adams and Jefferson had shared a bed in a crowded inn on Staten Island in September 1776, during a visit to the British general Lord Howe, leading to a famous disagreement about whether to keep the window open or shut. (As Franklin explained his theory of why people never caught colds through contact with cold air, Adams fell asleep.) But Adams seethed with envy at the man he called “the Grand Franklin,” who embodied the diplomatic success, polish, and global celebrity that Adams lacked. “His whole Life has been one continued Insult to good Manners and to Decency,” Adams wrote to the Boston politician James Warren in the 1780s, adding that Franklin's reputation for honesty and wisdom were exaggerated.⁹⁵ In what may have been an act of psychological projection, the envious Adams insisted repeatedly that Franklin was, in fact, envious of him. Writing to Warren's brilliant wife, the historian and poet Mercy Otis Warren, in 1807, Adams said that Franklin had never forgiven him for being chosen first among the five peace commissioners who were in Paris to negotiate the end of the Revolutionary War. “Jealousy And Envy engender Malice and Revenge,” Adams declared, writing about himself in the third person. “Franklin found that John Adams possessed more of the Confidence of his Country than himself.”⁹⁶

Violating his own strictures against envious gossip, Adams suggested that Franklin was an adulterer, noting that the king of France had become exasperated with a French duchess who was constantly fawning over “the Grand Franklin, for reasons which I could detail, from probable Conjecture.” The king, according to Adams, “Sometimes Smiled, Sometimes Snickered” and “gave

Secret orders to have a Chamber Pot made of the finest materials and most exquisite Workmanship, with the most exact Portrait of the Grand Franklin painted on the Bottom of it” so that the duchess in her bedchamber should “have the Satisfaction of contemplating the Image of her Great Philosopher and Politician whenever she had occasion to look at it.” At another house in Paris, Adams heard, the guests had passed around a portrait where “America was represented as a Virgin naked and as beautifull,” and “the grand Franklin, with his bald head, with his few long scattering straight hairs” was depicted “in the Act of debauching her behind her back. Can you imagine any Ridicule more exquisite than this both upon America and Franklin?”⁹⁷

In fact, it was Adams who feared nothing more than ridicule, and, in his calmer moments of self-awareness, he acknowledged that his ruling passion was vanity. Like Franklin, Adams was committed to Pythagorean self-accounting. He struggled throughout his life to overcome his vanity, which he called “self-love,” and to cultivate the humility that Franklin came closer to achieving.

Notes

One: Order. Twelve Virtues and the Pursuit of Happiness

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14. See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 134, Kindle edition (“For Jefferson and his contemporaries, happiness no doubt demanded safety or security.... The inherent right to pursue happiness probably also included ‘the means of acquiring and possessing property,’ but not the ownership of specific things since property can be sold and is therefore alienable.”)
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17. *The Dhammapada*, 1:1, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007).
18. Eknath Easwaran, *Gandhi the Man: How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2011), 125.
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Two: Temperance. Ben Franklin's Quest for Moral Perfection

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