

Before You Read

from *The Autobiography*

Make the Connection Quickwrite

From founding a nation to flying to the moon, Americans have always believed in the possibility of progress. Progress, however, can be measured in many ways—technological, financial, educational, social, and even spiritual. Just as Benjamin Franklin invented devices to improve the quality of life in America, he also tried to invent a moral “machine” to improve the quality of his own character. Today a walk through a bookstore or a glance at TV commercials quickly reveals that self-improvement is still a hot topic. Jot down the titles of any self-help books you know of or of TV self-help programs that you have seen. Why do you think so many of these books and programs are popular?

Reading Skills Making Inferences

One of the pleasures of reading an autobiography is getting to know the writer’s personality, as well as his or her philosophical beliefs and attitudes—in other words, what makes the writer “tick.” In many cases, though, writers don’t directly reveal this information. Readers need to look beneath the surface of the text to **infer**, or use clues to guess, the writer’s implicit, or suggested but unstated, beliefs.

As you read this excerpt from *The Autobiography*, jot down any words or phrases that help you infer Franklin’s attitudes and beliefs. For example, how do you think Franklin felt about being self-reliant and practical?

Background

Franklin began *The Autobiography* when he was sixty-five and continued working on it intermittently for years, although he never finished it and it was not published during his lifetime. When Franklin was a teenager, he was apprenticed to his older brother James, who printed a Boston newspaper. Disputes arose between the brothers, and the younger Franklin fled Boston for Philadelphia to escape from a second, secret indenture, or contract of service, that his brother had forced him to sign. This selection begins with Franklin’s arrival in Philadelphia.

Vocabulary Development

arduous (är’jōō·əs) *adj.*: difficult.

rectitude (rek’tē·tōōd’) *n.*: correctness.

facilitate (fə·sill’ē·tāt’) *v.*: make easier.

subsequent (sib’wənt) *adj.*: following.

eradicate (ē·rad’ikāt’) *v.*: eliminate.

SKILLS FOCUS

Reading Skills
Make inferences
about a writer’s
beliefs.

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Vocabulary
Practice

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Odometer used by Benjamin Franklin to measure postal routes.

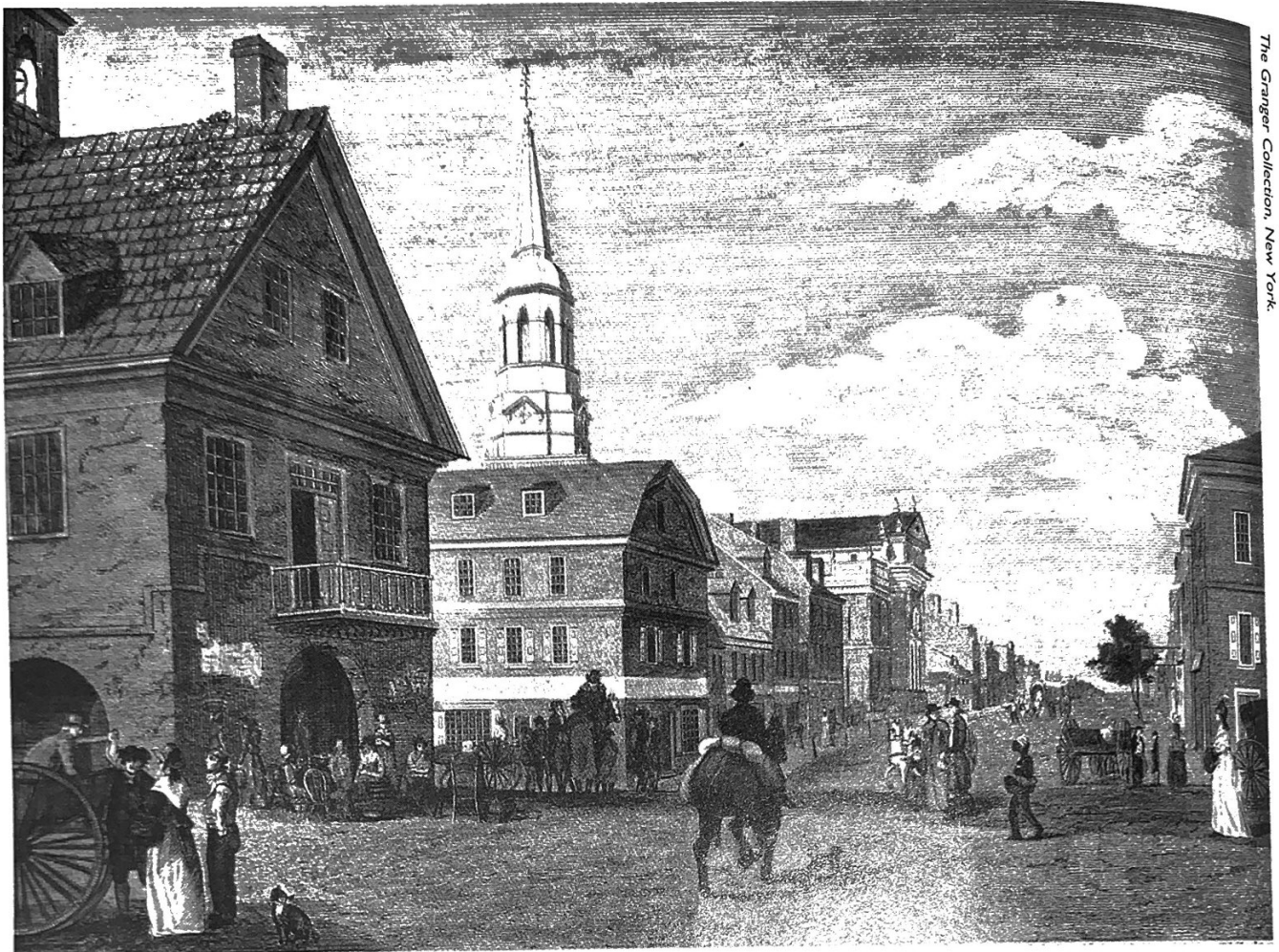


Philadelphia Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. Martin Siskel Collection (P.1984.23)

Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky (c. 1805) by Benjamin West.
Oil on paper on canvas (13 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 10").

from *The Autobiography*

Benjamin Franklin



Second Street, North from Market Street, with Christ Church, Philadelphia (1799)
by W. Birch & Son. Colored line engraving.

Arrival in Philadelphia

I have been the more particular in this description of my journey, and shall be so of my first entry into that city, that you may in your mind compare such unlikely beginnings with the figure I have since made there. I was in my working dress, my best clothes being to come round by sea. I was dirty from my journey; my pockets were stuffed out with shirts and stockings, and I knew no soul nor where to look for lodging. I was fatigued with traveling, rowing, and want of rest, I was very hungry; and my whole stock of cash consisted of a Dutch dollar, and about a shilling in copper. The latter I gave the people of the boat for my passage, who at first refused it, on account of my rowing; but I insisted on their taking it. A man being some-

times more generous when he has but a little money than when he has plenty, perhaps through fear of being thought to have but little. Then I walked up the street, gazing about till near the market house I met a boy with bread. I had made many a meal on bread, and, inquiring where he got it, I went immediately to the baker's he directed me to, in Second Street, and asked for biscuit, intending such as we had in Boston; but they, it seems, were not made in Philadelphia. Then I asked for a three-penny loaf, and was told they had none such. So not considering or knowing the difference of money, and the greater cheapness nor the names of his bread, I bade him give me three-penny worth of any sort. He gave me, accordingly, three great puffy rolls. I was surprised at the quantity, but took it, and, having no room

in my pockets, walked off with a roll under each arm, and eating the other. Thus I went up Market Street as far as Fourth Street, passing by the door of Mr. Read, my future wife's father; when she, standing at the door, saw me, and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward, ridiculous appearance. Then I turned and went down Chestnut Street and part of Walnut Street, eating my roll all the way, and, coming round, found myself again at Market Street wharf, near the boat I came in, to which I went for a draft¹ of the river water; and, being filled with one of my rolls, gave the other two to a woman and her child that came down the river in the boat with us, and were waiting to go farther.

Thus refreshed, I walked again up the street, which by this time had many clean-dressed people in it, who were all walking the same way. I joined them, and thereby was led into the great meetinghouse of the Quakers² near the market. I sat down among them, and, after looking round awhile and hearing nothing said, being very drowsy through labor and want of rest the preceding night, I fell fast asleep, and continued so till the meeting broke up, when one was kind enough to rouse me. This was, therefore, the first house I was in, or slept in, in Philadelphia. . . .

Arriving at Moral Perfection

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at



Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, clothes, or habitation.

Drawing by David Levine. Reprinted with permission from The New York Review of Books. Copyright © 1973 NYREV, Inc.

any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous,³ was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that

the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalog more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. 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. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen

3. **virtuous** *adj.*: morally excellent; pure.

1. **draft** *n.*: gulp or swallow.

2. **Quakers**: members of the Religious Society of Friends, a Christian group founded in the seventeenth century.

Vocabulary

arduous (är'jōō·əs) *adj.*: difficult.

rectitude (rek'tā·tōōd') *n.*: correctness.

names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept,⁴ which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. **Temperance.** *Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.*
2. **Silence.** *Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling⁵ conversation.*
3. **Order.** *Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.*
4. **Resolution.** *Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.*
5. **Frugality.** *Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.*
6. **Industry.** *Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.*
7. **Sincerity.** *Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.*
8. **Justice.** *Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.*
9. **Moderation.** *Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.*
10. **Cleanliness.** *Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.*
11. **Tranquility.** *Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.*

4. **precept** *n.*: rule of moral conduct; principle.
 5. **trifling** *adj.*: unimportant; shallow.



I wished to live without committing any fault at any time.

Drawing by David Levine. Reprinted with permission from *The New York Review of Books*. Copyright © 1973 NYREV, Inc.

12. **Chastity.** *Rarely use venery⁶ but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.*
13. **Humility.** *Imitate Jesus and Socrates.⁷*

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

arranged them with that view, as they stand above. *Temperance* first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting⁸ attraction of ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, *silence* would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling com-

6. **venery** (ven'ər·ē) *n.*: sex.

7. **Socrates** (sək'rə·tēz') (470?–399 B.C.): Greek philosopher who is said to have lived a simple, virtuous life.

8. **unremitting** *adj.*: not stopping; persistent.

Vocabulary

facilitate (fə·sil'ə·tāt') *v.*: make easier.

pany, I gave *silence* the second place. This and the next, *order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. *Resolution*, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues; *frugality* and *industry* freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of *sincerity* and *justice*, etc., etc. Conceiving then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras⁹ in his Golden Verses, daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

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

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 every¹⁰ the least offense against *temperance*, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I supposed the habit of that virtue so much strengthened, and its opposite weakened, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go through a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and, having accom-

9. **Pythagoras** (pi·thag'ə·rəs): Greek philosopher and mathematician of the sixth century B.C.
10. **every**: archaic for "even."

Form of the Pages

Temperance							
Eat not to dullness. Drink not to elevation.							
	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
T							
S							
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plished the first, proceeds to a second, so I should have, I hoped, the encouraging pleasure of seeing on my pages the progress I made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots, till in the end, by a number of courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination. . . . ■



Vocabulary

subsequent (sub'si·kwənt) *adj.*: following.

eradicate (ē·rad'i·kāt') *v.*: eliminate.

Before You Read

from Poor Richard's Almanack

Make the Connection Quickwrite

TV talk shows, radio call-in programs, newspaper columns, how-to books, inspirational speakers—sometimes today's world seems to overflow with people who want to give advice. Dispensing wisdom—or at least reflections on one's own experience—has become an American industry. Why do you think so many readers and listeners flock to advice givers? Make a list of three pieces of advice you would give to an incoming freshman at your school.

Literary Focus Aphorisms

An **aphorism** is a brief, cleverly worded statement that makes a wise observation about life. Aphorisms grow out of speeches, sermons, religious texts such as the Bible (“Love your neighbor”), poems and stories, advertisements, and most commonly, the expressions of ordinary people in ordinary situations.

Aphorisms can serve many purposes. They entertain, especially through their humor, wit, and wordplay; they instruct, suggesting ways to overcome obstacles, solve problems, and achieve success; and they inspire, often providing a kind of moral uplift. Aphorisms can also **satirize**, using humor to mock and criticize the way things are. They can address any subject—from war and peace to the fleas on a dog.

An **aphorism** is a brief, cleverly worded statement that makes a wise observation about life.

For more on Aphorisms, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

Background

With the publication of *Poor Richard's Almanack* in 1732, Franklin found his biggest publishing success, and he continued to publish his almanac for twenty-five years. Almost every house had an almanac. Almanacs calculated the tides and the phases of the moon, forecast the weather for the next year, and even provided astrological advice. Many almanacs also supplied recipes, jokes, and aphorisms. Poor Richard was an imaginary astrologer with a critical wife named Bridget. One year Bridget wrote the aphorisms to answer those her husband had written the year before on female idleness. Another time Bridget included “better” weather forecasts so that people would know the good days for drying their clothes.

Franklin's practicality shows itself not only in the content of his almanacs but also in the way he put them together: He took his wit and wisdom wherever he found it. He printed old sayings translated from other languages, lifted some aphorisms from other writers, and adapted others from popular and local sources. An American to the core, Franklin never hesitated to rework what he found to suit his own purposes. For example, for the 1758 almanac, Franklin skimmed all his previous editions to compose a single speech on economy. This speech, called “The Way to Wealth,” has become one of the best known of Franklin's works. It has been mistakenly believed to be representative of Poor Richard's wisdom. Poor Richard often called for prudence and thrift, but he just as often favored extravagance.

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Benjamin Franklin
Keyword: LE7 11-1

from *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Benjamin Franklin



Panel from an engraving for
Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard*
Illustrated (c. 1800).

The Granger Collection, New York.

1. Love your neighbor; yet don't pull down your hedge.
2. If a man empties his purse into his head, no man can take it away from him. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.
3. Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.
4. Tart words make no friends; a spoonful of honey will catch more flies than a gallon of vinegar.
5. Glass, china, and reputation are easily cracked and never well mended.
6. Fish and visitors smell in three days.
7. He that lieth down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.
8. One today is worth two tomorrows.
- A** 9. A truly great man will neither trample on a worm nor sneak to an emperor.
10. A little neglect may breed mischief; for want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the rider was lost; for want of the rider the battle was lost.
11. If you would know the value of money, go and try to borrow some; he that goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing.
12. He that composes himself is wiser than he that composes books.
13. He that is of the opinion that money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money.
14. If a man could have half his wishes, he would double his troubles.
15. 'Tis hard for an empty bag to stand upright.
16. A small leak will sink a great ship.
17. A plowman on his legs is higher than a gentleman on his knees.
18. Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterward.
19. Nothing brings more pain than too much pleasure; nothing more bondage than too much liberty.


Response and Analysis

from *The Autobiography*


Reading Check

1. What was Franklin's condition in life when he arrived in Philadelphia?
2. What does Franklin say must happen before people can depend on correct moral behavior?
3. Why does Franklin place temperance first on his list?
4. How many "courses" of his list of virtues does Franklin plan to go through in one year?

Thinking Critically

5. What **inferences** can you make about Franklin's attitudes and beliefs, based on his plan to achieve moral perfection? If Franklin were alive today, what modern causes might he support? Explain. 
6. Franklin writes about "arriving at moral perfection" just as he had earlier written about his arrival in the city of Philadelphia. What does this similarity in his language reveal about Franklin's philosophical assumptions?

Extending and Evaluating

7. Compare Robert Fulghum's list of things learned in kindergarten (see the **Connection** on page 74) to Franklin's list of virtues. Which list do you think would be more useful to people today? In general, how does Franklin's scheme for moral perfection compare with the self-help books available today? Be sure to refer to your Quickwrite notes. 

Literary Criticism

8. Reactions to *The Autobiography* have sometimes been negative. Read the following comment by satirist Mark Twain. What is Twain's **tone** in this paragraph—that is, his attitude toward Ben Franklin?

[Franklin had] a malevolence which is without parallel in history; he would work all day and then sit up nights and let on to be studying algebra by the light of a smoldering fire, so that all the boys might have to do that also, or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown upon them. Not satisfied with these proceedings, he had a fashion of living wholly on bread and water, and studying astronomy at mealtime—a thing which has brought affliction to millions of boys since, whose fathers had read Franklin's pernicious biography.

—Mark Twain

The word *pernicious* (pər-nish'əs), in the last sentence, means "deadly." What elements of Franklin's autobiography is Twain attacking? How do you feel about Twain's grumblings?

from *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Thinking Critically

1. Poor Richard's aphorisms often succeed because of their **implied metaphors**, or metaphors that do not state explicitly the two things being compared. Re-read aphorisms 4, 7, 15, and 16. Then, identify what each of the following images might mean: a spoonful of honey, lying down with dogs, an empty bag, a small leak.
2. Many of Poor Richard's aphorisms convey moral lessons. Choose one of the aphorisms, and restate it in your own words, explaining its moral lesson.
3. Which of the aphorisms reveals a healthy skepticism and humor about human nature?

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Analyze aphorisms.

Reading Skills
Make inferences about a writer's beliefs.

Writing Skills
Write a handbook with aphorisms. Write an essay comparing and contrasting two writers.

Vocabulary Skills
Demonstrate word knowledge.



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Projects and Activities

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