

# Benjamin franklin: the man behind himself



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Benjamin Franklin has a reputation in American – and around the world – as a self-made man for rising from indentured servitude to become a wealthy, independent man. As a founding father of the United States, Franklin's independence and industry are valued as having helped create the country we know today. However, there is much more to Franklin's demeanor than many Americans know. Through his Autobiography, one can learn a plethora of information regarding the character of Franklin. His personal values often conflicted with political ideologies and he constantly referred to moral relativism. His self-perception was occasionally skewed, yet sometimes coincided with others' perceptions of him. As an international celebrity, it seems Benjamin Franklin considered himself a strong, superior leader to whom moral law did not always apply, yet his morality prevails as one of his strongest legacies. It is possible that, simply through working to become the celebrity of (perhaps false) moral perfection America still celebrates, Benjamin Franklin really is a self-made man, actively working to shape his identity in terms of reputation and morality.

Firstly, Franklin's own moral ambiguity is at times disturbing. While he later preaches to others about moral perfection, he himself is lacking in that area; he has affairs with married women (whose husbands are his friends, no less), he abandons his brother while he is in jail, and he commits plenty of other petty offenses, particularly in his younger years. Franklin is very rarely judged for these offenses, however, because he reworks these events into a justifiable narrative for himself. For example, Franklin abandons a vegetarian diet, which he took up for moral reasons, and defends himself for it.

I balanc'd some time between Principle and Inclination: till I recollected, that when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their stomachs: Then, thought I, if you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you. So I din'd upon Cod very heartily and continu'd to eat with other People, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable Diet. So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable Creature, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do. (Franklin 37)

For Franklin, principle tends to shrivel in the face of inclination, because, as he sees it, inclination can be justified with the proper amount of rhetorical work; because Franklin is smart and cunning, he seems to be able to construct an argument in favor of whatever choices he may make. His principles are actually very weak indeed. Franklin tends to argue without having true moral stances. In his *Historicus* essay, Franklin takes a lenient stance against slavery, but quickly retracts himself from this stance lest he anger anyone; he ends the essay on a whimpering note of neutrality rather than a proud, solid argument in favor of real beliefs - in whichever way he may lean. In his *Autobiography*, as well, he argues for the sake of women's education, but not for the reasons one would hope. He does not necessarily support the endeavor; rather, he claims, " I took the contrary Side, perhaps a little for Dispute sake" (Franklin 19). When he does make an argument based on a strong position, it seems it is for himself, such as in his " The Petition of the Letter Z," in which he criticizes the man attempting to replace him; Franklin's self-indulgent nature and favor of his own dilemmas over those of society are clear in how he writes about these matters. The man allows himself whatever gratification necessary, then worries about justifying his

actions later, uncaring about how he may be affecting the overall society with his moral relativity.

Despite caring only for matters involving himself, Franklin works to ensure others' adherence to a moral code as well, using himself as an example of sorts, somehow. His created superiority over others may work to shame them, thus creating an externally perceived superiority of Franklin over others as well. Franklin is keen to observe any wrongdoings by his friends and correct them immediately. When he notices Ralph tends to favor Franklin's writing over Osbourne's, Franklin devises a scheme to switch his writing with Osbourne's, thus catching Ralph in the lie he creates (Franklin 39). Ironically, what Ralph does is similar to what Franklin does. Ralph values what seems to be good based on its author, Franklin, or the celebrity and importance placed upon it. Franklin values what seems to be good based on how it will affect him rather than how it actually holds up to a moral code. Franklin's criticism of others based on this offense and his exemption of himself under the same code proves that either Franklin does not recognize himself as breaking the rules he creates, or he lives by a very loose interpretation of morality. It seems most likely that Franklin simply believes himself above such rules, as his writing often points to his belief that he is superior to others. He mocks the workers in the new printing-house he works in, demonstrating his place above them, saying, " I drank only Water; the other Workmen, near 50 in Number, were great Guzzlers of Beer. On occasion I carried up and down Stairs a large Form of Types in each hand, when others carried but one in both Hands. They wonder'd to see from this and several Instances that the Water-American as they call'd me was

stronger than themselves who drunk strong Beer” (Franklin 45). Franklin claims superiority over these new acquaintances not only by strength of body, but also by the value of hard work and sobriety. While Franklin never claims to be sober of alcohol, in this moment he implies it because it benefits his image by the public, placing him in a position reigning over other, less perfect individuals. Perhaps if Franklin emphasizes his perfection enough, it will be believed by the masses.

Franklin directly attempts to shape the minds of others, as well, taking it upon himself to instruct the public and teach them the laws of goodness; he takes up an almost god-like stance in this way, determining the rules of the game himself. Through his career, he claims, “[...] I endeavored to prepare the Minds of the People by writing on the Subject in the Newspapers, which was my usual Custom in such Cases [...]” (Franklin 115). His need to change people shows he is unhappy with where society stands in its overall “goodness,” but he only superficially acknowledges that he may be a cause of this.

It was about this time that I conceiv’d the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection. I wish’d to live without committing any Fault at anytime; 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. (Franklin 78).

While Franklin supposedly attempts to live in moral perfection, he still takes a stance as a god-like figure. Firstly, he claims to believe to know right and

wrong arbitrarily, something that can rarely be defined in black and white terms. Then, he attempts to reason that he can become entirely mistake-free, something that is commonly acknowledged to be impossible of humans. His guide to moral perfection (Franklin 79) shows a belief that morality can be categorized and quantified, enforcing the idea that Franklin is so superior as to have a grasp on something as complex as moral reason, turning it into something simple.

Franklin's preoccupation with fixing mistakes and erasing errata shows his inability to deal with imperfection. He worries that whatever view he may take up will be set in place forever; as an intellectual, constantly learning and growing, Franklin may understand that his views might change over time and may not want to be considered hypocritical or contradicting. He scoffs at the Quaker people for holding true to a particular principle that Franklin does not believe in. " These Embarrassments that the Quakers suffer'd from having establish'd and publish'd it as one of their Principles, that no kind of War was lawful, and which being once published, they could not afterwards, however they might change their minds, easily get rid of [...]" (Franklin 109). As this belief is not his own, he discredits it primarily, but he also seems to degrade it because it is a strong principle. As a writer, printer, and publisher, Franklin's worst fear seems to be the permanence of the written, published word. While the publishing of such work helps him to develop celebrity and essentially immortal fame, it also creates a set mind, something that Franklin does not work with well.

While it can easily be argued that Franklin's values are sometimes skewed in a way that is morally corrupt, Franklin's intentions seem to be mostly good.

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While his claims at perfect morality work to advance his literary career, they also work to bring comfort to the general population; in this way, Franklin really is a man of the people, whether or not he believes or practices the information and tidings he publishes. Through his work as an informant, he helped create and advance America's media and print culture as we know it today. He claims, " I consider'd my Newspaper also as another Means of communicating Instruction, and in that View frequently reprinted in it Extracts from the Spectator and other moral Writers, and sometimes publish'd little Pieces of my own which had been first compos'd for Reading in our Junto" (Franklin 92). He dedicated his life to providing important education to the public. While Franklin was not morally perfect, as he aspired to be, he took his duty as a moral instructor seriously, and was perhaps the only man brave enough to take on the task. Through his journey as a literary professional, one can see the real codes Franklin lived by: industry, yes, but also growth, education, and an open mind. Through these values, Franklin was able to mold himself into the role model America still looks up to today, despite the scandals and errata in which he involved himself.