As suggested in the Introduction, American deism is better understood as a general philosophical orientation that allowed for a certain amount of flexibility in individual belief than a set-in-stone catechism of infallible and obligatory doctrine. There was obviously a nucleus of belief shared by all deists, giving them a distinct intellectual identity: conviction in an orderly, rational universe, as well as a rational and benevolent deity; a distrust of metaphysical speculation and scriptural authority; and advocacy of empirical methodology and a concomitant scorn of such supernaturalist tenets as revelation; a denial of the divinity of Jesus and the triune God; confidence in human progress; and an emphasis on the utility of virtue. But integral to this core of deistic thought was the fact that it accommodated a great deal of interpretive leeway. Some deists, for example, applauded Jesus’ ethical teachings so long as they were stripped of their supernaturalist and ecclesial “corruptions”; others deplored them. Most deists accepted the immortality of the soul, but a few denied the possibility. Yet others were convinced that the divine reveals itself only through the lawlike operations of the physical order, while some were willing to grant that God at least in principle is capable of “special” providences in the moral realm. In short, the credal tolerance deism so ardently advocated allowed for a wide latitude in personal belief among its proponents but did not result in the reduction of the movement to a laissez-faire hodgepodge of amorphously private opinion. This flexibility was especially apparent in deism’s early stage, when some sympathizers attempted to straddle the traditional world of orthodoxy and the Enlightenment one of rationalism. Very often, in fact, it was (and is) difficult to distinguish a moderate deist from a liberal Christian.

Benjamin Franklin (1706–90), the first noteworthy American advocate of deism, was one of those caught in the middle. He clearly was not an orthodox Christian, but neither was he as unequivocally deistic in his thinking as Jefferson, Paine, or Palmer. Rooted in tradition but baptized in the New Learning of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, Franklin’s religious orientation was a sometimes uneasy balance between the two, with the pendulum more to the rationalist than the Christian side. He is best characterized as an ambiguous deist.

The equivocalness of his religious thought emerged quite early. Although he tells us in the Autobiography that he was reared “piously in the Dissenting way” by Calvinist parents and “religiously educated as a Presbyterian,” young

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Franklin dropped whatever overt allegiance he might have had to the gloomy theology of the Westminster Confession by the time he was sixteen. Like so many other adolescents who rebel against an orthodox upbringing, he initially hurled himself in the opposite direction and at the age of nineteen wrote a precocious treatise, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, defending dogmatic materialism. Two features about the *Dissertation* shed light upon the fundamental ambiguity of Franklin's religious perspective. In the first place, the essay, which claims to be a series of logical inferences from Newtonian mechanism, arrives at conclusions reminiscent of (although not identical to) the very Calvinist doctrine Franklin thought he had rejected: an insistence that physical events as well as human destinies are predetermined by divine power and knowledge. Moreover, Franklin soon rejected this Calvinist-cum-mechanistic treatise, correctly fearing that its reasoning posed a threat to moral rectitude, and eventually came to see the habituation of virtue as the centerpiece of an authentically religious life. But it is arguable that the change in philosophical direction had its distant origins in Franklin's youthful absorption of Cotton Mather's *Bonifacius* (1710), an essay that stressed the everyday utility of Christian virtue. As Franklin himself confesses in the *Autobiography*, Mather's work "gave me such a turn of thinking, as to have an influence on my conduct through life; for I have always set a greater value on the character of a doer of good than on any other kind of reputation."

The point is that the initial composition and the eventual repudiation of the *Dissertation* reflect the young Franklin's tense and at times conceptually unstable mixture of traditionally orthodox and radically Enlightened currents. The attraction and repulsion between the two reemerged time and again in most of his subsequent reflections on religion. This is not to say that Franklin was a confused or sloppy thinker, but only that he, like so many of his generation, mirrored the religious uncertainly of the day. Franklin grew to intellectual maturity during a conceptual watershed, in which Enlightenment rationalism challenged but did not yet supplant the traditional Calvinist ethos. It was perhaps inevitable that his thinking should reflect both.

Even so, Franklin was more deistic in his orientation than not. This is apparent from an examination of the three central assumptions around which his religious worldview revolved. First, he was convinced that all varieties of religious sentiment and all credal expressions contain some element of truth, and the rational person therefore should refrain from narrow-mindedly repudiating any of them. But he also believed that most religious systems had allowed doctrinal misconstructions and irrational bigotries to distort their intuitions on the truth. Consequently, it is equally unwarranted for a rational person to endorse any of them wholeheartedly. For Franklin, all systematic attempts to explain nature and God are prone to error, particularly when they indulge in a priori "metaphysical reasoning" (an approach that Franklin himself, except in
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his youthful and soon lamented *Dissertation*, always shunned). The wise individual, as Franklin points out in his 1738 letter to his parents, avoids the temptation of dogmatizing about religious questions and instead follows the dictates of reason in evaluating them.

But how does reason enable humans to separate doctrinal wheat from chaff? By directing the powers of understanding to an examination of experience and nature. Franklin early on had read Locke’s defense of an empiricist epistemology, becoming convinced that all ideas originate from and can be judged according to sensate experience. In theological terms, this implied that the book of nature and the lessons of ordinary experience are capable of shedding light upon the existence as well as the character of the deity. For Franklin, the study of physical and human nature discloses an orderliness that cannot be gratuitous but instead is only explicable if the existence of a rational and all-powerful First Cause is posited. Moreover, as he argues in *On the Providence of God in the Government of the World* (1732), an examination of natural operations reveals that they are conducive to the well-being of humans, thereby leading to the assumption that the First Cause is also benevolent and compassionate. It is but a short step from the acknowledgement of divine benevolence to the postulate that the most appropriate way for humans to adore the deity is to imitate his goodness through the cultivation of virtuous behavior and that such behavior will be rewarded, in this life as well as the next. As Franklin has Poor Richard say, “What is serving God? ‘Tis doing Good to Man.” These three tenets—that a rational and omnipotent God exists, that he is benevolent, and that humans ought to imitate his goodness and will be judged in terms of their success in so doing—are supported by reason. Other specifically Christian doctrines—the divinity of Jesus, the resurrection of the body, divine revelation, miracles, and so on—are not and thus may or may not be correct. As Franklin said toward the end of his life, they are “questions I do not dogmatize upon” (letter to Ezra Stiles, 9 March 1790). But given his suspicion of “metaphysical reasoning” as well as his certitude that nature is uniformly lawlike and hence explicable in rational terms, it is understandable that Franklin was less sanguine about their truth.

The second fundamental assumption of Franklin’s religious worldview is as deistic in tenor as the first: his insistence on the rationality as well as practicality of a virtuous life and his concomitant conviction that the noblest way of serving and worshipping the deity is in the regular performance of good works. All of the American deists concentrated on moral questions; Elihu Palmer even wrote one of the most sophisticated ethical treatises of the Early Republic. But Franklin’s preoccupation with the ideal of moral perfection bordered on obsession. From his earliest to his final writings, regardless of the subject matter, Franklin rarely missed an opportunity to bring up the issues of virtue and moral progress. In fact, he seriously contemplated writing a tract on virtue, although
public and private responsibilities prevented him from doing more than outlin-
ing his thoughts in the *Autobiography* or distilling them, through Poor Rich-
ard, into the succinct moralistic maxims so familiar to schoolchildren.

Franklin’s intoxication with moral perfection, as well as his no-nonsense,
quasi-mathematical program for cultivating the virtues, has been the brunt of
much subsequent criticism. The usual charge is that Franklin the ethicist is
more of a bookkeeper than a reflective thinker, substituting an unimaginative
calculus of ethical checks and balances for a genuinely sophisticated treatment
of the moral life. This criticism has undeniable merit. Although there is a dis-
arming quaintness to Franklin’s famous plan for the daily exercise of virtues
(such as temperance, silence, order, frugality, and industry), it can also be read
as the facile musings of a self-satisfied and rather shallow moralist. But when
examined against the backdrop of his deistic worldview, Franklin’s remarks on
moral perfection shed a good deal of their seeming flimsiness.

Franklin was convinced that moral progress is dependent on two necessary
conditions: a rationally consistent attitude of benevolence and tolerance, and
a single-minded fidelity to virtuous behavior. The first condition reflects the
lawlike and predictable essence of both deity and nature, as well as Franklin’s
belief that error-prone humans have no logical or normative justification for
dogmatic intractability. The second is based on the Aristotelian assumption
that virtue is a learned behavior instead of an innate quality and that the most
rational way to cultivate it is through concrete habituation to good works.
Franklin did not discount the importance of good intentions, but, as in his *Self-
Denial Not the Essence of Virtue* (1735), he insisted that the ultimate test of
moral development is in the doing, not the contemplating. Otherwise, it is too
easy for humans to succumb to lazy or self-indulgent behavior and weasel out
of moral culpability by claiming that the spirit is willing, even if the flesh is
weak. For Franklin, such a gross discrepancy between motive and act is too
irrational to serve as an excuse for malefashion. Since the private intentions of
an individual can never be fully appraised by others, the only remaining crite-
rion for ethical evaluation is ostensible behavior. Moreover, a methodical effort
to perform virtuous actions, even if the deeds initially are done reluctantly or
with an ill will, eventually conditions individuals to virtue in such a way that
they ultimately come to desire what originally they merely endured: the con-
sistent performance of good works.

In short, Franklin, like all the American deists, sought an objective, naturalistic
means by which to nurture and gauge virtue, one that would be accessible to all
rational humans because it was disabused of mysterious appeals to innate predis-
positions or supernaturalist entreaties to divine grace. Read in this light, his math-
ematical regimen for the cultivation of virtue appears more profound.

The third and final conviction around which Franklin the deist constructed
his worldview was an Enlightenment-influenced faith in the perfectibility of
society and individuals. In common with all American deists, Franklin had complete confidence that science was the vehicle through which both natural forces and human irrationality would be tamed. Unlike the other deists (except perhaps Jefferson), Franklin was also an accomplished scientist and so had first-hand experience on which to base his estimation. The scientific charting of natural and psychological laws would usher in the age of reason if society only learned to tolerate dissent and encourage the free interplay of ideas—or at least so Franklin believed in his more optimistic moments. In keeping with his fundamental ambiguity, he was not always so hopeful. For example, in a letter to Joseph Priestley (8 February 1780) which praises science’s progress in technology and physics, Franklin also laments its apparent inability to foster equal advancement in morality: “O that moral Science were in as fair a way of Improvement, that Men would cease to be Wolves to one another, and that human Beings would at length learn what they now improperly call Humanity!” In an even more remarkable display of pessimism, Franklin advises an unknown correspondent (possibly Paine) to refrain from publishing a treatise on deism, on the grounds that the manuscript’s critique of revealed religion might damage the inducements to morality contained in orthodox Christianity. And “if men are so wicked as we now see them with religion, what would they be if without it.”

However, these occasional moments of cynicism are less characteristic of Franklin than his expressions of exuberant optimism. Instead, they are the cautionary remnants of a Calvinist background. More typical is Franklin’s ardent defense of religious tolerance, as seen in his Dialogue between Two Presbyterians (1735), or the cool-headed, rationalistic faith evident in his Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion (1728) and Doctrine to be Preached (1731). Franklin’s religious perspective may have uncomfortably waffled throughout the years between Calvinist gloom and enlightenment optimism, but when considered in its entirety, it is remarkably consistent for a thinker of his generation. As he reaffirmed at life’s end, “I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him is doing good to his other Children. That the soul of Man is immortal, and well be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them . . . in whatever Sect I meet with them.” With only minor exceptions, few subsequent deists would have disagreed with this eloquent profession.

A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain (1725)

The earliest (and, in many ways, the most philosophically ambitious) of Franklin’s works, the Dissertation was intended as a response to William Wollaston’s (1660–
1724) liberal tract The Religion of Nature Delineated. Franklin was a young journeyman in a London printing house when he dashed off the Dissertation, and its strict defense of thoroughgoing mechanism reflects the youthful iconoclasm and intellectual self-assuredness with which it was written. But Franklin was soon to shed his exuberant confidence in the Dissertation’s thesis. Although one hundred copies of it were printed, Franklin quickly destroyed most of them, fearing that the dissemination of his treatise would “have an Ill Tendency.” In later life he wrote an essay (now lost) repudiating the Dissertation’s conclusions, and in his Autobiography, he listed the early work as one of his life’s “erratas.”

Considering Franklin’s subsequent emphasis on the importance of “truth, sincerity and integrity, in dealings between man and man,” it is obvious why he came to regret and reject this early venture into “metaphysical reasoning.” Starting from the affirmation of an all-powerful and supremely good deity, Franklin’s Dissertation infers that reality is mechanistic in nature, that humans are thereby without free will, that desire for pleasure and aversion to pain are the ubiquitous sources of motivation and behavior, and that human actions, given their deterministic character, are morally indifferent. In sum, the Dissertation defends a dogmatic, quasi-Hobbesian materialism and concludes that everything is as it must be and that everything is good because ordained by an all-good God.

The Dissertation’s historical interest lies in the fact that it pushes deism’s postulation of a perfectly lawlike deity as well as its endorsement of Newtonian mechanism into a radical denial of free will, ethical responsibility, and human progress. This was a step conventional deists obviously were unwilling to take, insofar as it undercut their Enlightenment faith in the progressively liberating effects, societal as well as normative, of reason. Franklin soon realized that his defense of a pervasive materialism was not so much a brief for deism as a reductio ad absurdum repudiation of it, and he consequently backed off. But his eventual renunciation of the Dissertation’s mechanistic conclusions never dampened his fundamental trust in basic deistic tenets.

Sect. 1. Of Liberty and Necessity

I. There is said to be a First Mover, who is called GOD, Maker of the Universe.

II. He is said to be all-wise, all-good, all powerful.

These two Propositions being allow’d and asserted by People of almost every Sect and Opinion; I have here suppos’d them granted, and laid them down as the Foundation of my Argument; What follows then, being a Chain of Consequences truly drawn from them, will stand or fall as they are true or false.

III. If He is all-good, whatsoever He doth must be good.

IV. If He is all-wise, whatsoever He doth must be wise.

The Truth of these Propositions, with relation to the two first, I think may be justly call’d evident; since, either that infinite Goodness will act what is ill,
or infinite Wisdom what is not wise, is too glaring a Contradiction not to be perceiv’d by any Man of common Sense, and deny’d as soon as understood.

V. If He is all-powerful, there can be nothing either existing or acting in the Universe against or without his Consent; and what He consents to must be good, because He is good; therefore Evil doth not exist.

Unde Malum? has been long a Question, and many of the Learned have perplex’d themselves and Readers to little Purpose in Answer to it. That there are both Things and Actions to which we give the Name of Evil, is not here deny’d, as Pain, Sickness, Want, Theft, Murder, &c. but that these and the like are not in reality Evils, Ills, or Defects in the Order of the Universe, is demonstrated in the next Section, as well as by this and the following Proposition. Indeed, to suppose any Thing to exist or be done, contrary to the Will of the Almighty, is to suppose him not almighty; or that Something (the Cause of Evil) is more mighty than the Almighty; an Inconsistence that I think no One will defend: And to deny any Thing or Action, which he consents to the existence of; to be good, is entirely to destroy his two Attributes of Wisdom and Goodness.

There is nothing done in the Universe, say the Philosophers, but what God either does, or permits to be done. This, as He is Almighty, is certainly true: But what need of this Distinction between doing and permitting? Why, first they take it for granted that many Things in the Universe exist in such a Manner as is not for the Best, and that many Actions are done which ought not to be done, or would be better undone; these Things or Actions they cannot ascribe to God as his, because they have already attributed to Him infinite Wisdom and Goodness; Here then is the Use of the Word Permit; He permits them to be done, say they. But we will reason thus: If God permits an Action to be done, it is because he wants either Power or Inclination to hinder it; in saying he wants Power, we deny Him to be almighty, and if we say He wants Inclination or Will, it must be, either because He is not Good, or the Action is not evil, (for all Evil is contrary to the Essence of infinite Goodness.) The former is inconsistent with his before-given Attribute of Goodness, therefore the latter must be true.

It will be said, perhaps, that God permits evil Actions to be done, for wise Ends and Purposes. But this Objection destroys itself; for whatever an infinitely good God hath wise Ends in suffering to be, must be good, is thereby made good, and cannot be otherwise.

VI. If a Creature is made by God, it must depend upon God, and receive all its Power from Him; with which Power the Creature can do nothing contrary to the Will of God, because God is Almighty; what is not contrary to His Will, must be agreeable to it; what is agreeable to it, must be good, because He is Good; therefore a Creature can do nothing but what is good.

This Proposition is much to the same Purpose with the former, but more
particular; and its Conclusion is as just and evident. Tho' a Creature may do many Actions which by his Fellow Creatures will be nam'd Evil, and which will naturally and necessarily cause or bring upon the Doer, certain Pains (which will likewise be call'd Punishments) yet this Proposition proves, that he cannot act what will be in itself really Ill, or displeasing to God. And that the painful Consequences of his evil Actions (so call'd) are not, as indeed they ought not to be, Punishments or Unhappinesses, will be shewn hereafter.

Nevertheless, the late learned Author of The Religion of Nature . . . , has given us a Rule or Scheme, whereby to discover which of our Actions ought to be esteem'd and denominated good, and which evil: It is in short this, "Every Action which is done according to Truth, is good; and every Action contrary to Truth, is evil: To act according to Truth is to use and esteem every Thing as what it is, &c. Thus if A steals a Horse from B, and rides away upon him, he uses him not as what he is in Truth, viz. the Property of another, but as his own, which is contrary to Truth, and therefore evil." But, as this Gentleman himself says (Sect. 1. Prop. VI.) "In order to judge rightly what any Thing is, it must be consider'd, not only what it is in one Respect, but also what it may be in any other Respect; and the whole Description of the Thing ought to be taken in:" So in this Case it ought to be consider'd, that A is naturally a covetous Being, feeling an Uneasiness in the want of B's Horse, which produces an Inclination for stealing him, stronger than his Fear of Punishment for so doing. This is Truth likewise, and A acts according to it when he steals the Horse. Besides, if it is prov'd to be a Truth, that A has not Power over his own Actions, it will be indisputable that he acts according to Truth, and impossible he should do otherwise.

I would not be understood by this to encourage or defend Theft; 'tis only for the sake of the Argument, and will certainly have no ill Effect. The Order and Course of Things will not be affected by Reasoning of this Kind; and 'tis as just and necessary, and as much according to Truth, for B to dislike and punish the Theft of his Horse, as it is for A to steal him.

VII. If the Creature is thus limited in his Actions, being able to do only such Things as God would have him to do, and not being able to refuse doing what God would have done; then he can have no such Thing as Liberty, Free-Will or Power to do or refrain an Action.

By Liberty is sometimes understood the Absence of Opposition; and in this Sense, indeed, all our Actions may be said to be the Effects of our Liberty: but it is a Liberty of the same Nature with the Fall of a heavy Body to the Ground; it has Liberty to fall, that is, it meets with nothing to hinder its Fall, but at the same Time it is necessitated to fall, and has no Power or Liberty to remain suspended.

But let us take the Argument in another View, and suppose ourselves to be, in the common sense of the Word, Free Agents. As Man is a Part of this great
Machine, the Universe, his regular Acting is requisite to the regular moving of
the whole. Among the many Things which lie before him to be done, he may,
as he is at Liberty and his Choice influenc’d by nothing, (for so it must be, or
he is not at Liberty) chuse any one, and refuse the rest. Now there is every
Moment something best to be done, which is alone then good, and with respect
to which, every Thing else is at that Time evil. In order to know which is best
to be done, and which not, it is requisite that we should have at one View all
the intricate Consequences of every Action with respect to the general Order
and Scheme of the Universe, both present and future; but they are innumera-
ble and incomprehensible by any Thing but Omniscience. As we cannot know
these, we have but as one Chance to ten thousand, to hit on the right Action;
we should then be perpetually blundering about in the Dark, and putting the
Scheme in Disorder; for every wrong Action of a Part, is a Defect or Blemish
in the Order of the Whole. Is it not necessary then, that our Actions should be
over-rul’d and govern’d by an all-wise Providence? How exact and regular is
every Thing in the natural World! How wisely in every Part contriv’d! We
cannot here find the least Defect! Those who have study’d the mere animal and
vegetable Creation, demonstrate that nothing can be more harmonious and
beautiful! All the heavenly Bodies, the Stars and Planets, are regulated with the
utmost Wisdom! And can we suppose less Care to be taken in the Order of the
moral than in the natural System? It is as if an ingenious Artificer, having
fram’d a curious Machine or Clock, and put its many intricate Wheels and
Powers in such a Dependance on one another, that the whole might move in
the most exact Order and Regularity, had nevertheless plac’d in it several other
Wheels endu’d with an independent Self-Motion, but ignorant of the general
Interest of the Clock; and these would every now and then be moving wrong,
disordering the true Movement, and making continual Work for the Mender;
which might better be prevented, by depriving them of that Power of Self-
Motion, and placing them in a Dependance on the regular Part of the Clock.

VIII. If there is no such Thing as Free-Will in Creatures, there can be neither
Merit nor Demerit in Creatures.

IX. And therefore every Creature must be equally esteem’d by the Creator.

These Propositions appear to be the necessary Consequences of the former.
And certainly no Reason can be given, why the Creator should prefer in his
Esteem one Part of His Works to another, if with equal Wisdom and Goodness
he design’d and created them all, since all Ill or Defect, as contrary to his
Nature, is excluded by his Power. We will sum up the Argument thus, When
the Creator first design’d the Universe, either it was His Will and Intention
that all Things should exist and be in the Manner they are at this Time; or it
was his Will they shoule otherwise i.e. in a different Manner: To say it was
His Will Things should be otherwise than they are, is to say Somewhat hath
contradicted His Will, and broken His Measures, which is impossible because
inconsistent with his Power; therefore we must allow that all Things exist now in a Manner agreeable to His Will, and in consequence of that are all equally Good, and therefore equally esteem'd by Him.

I proceed now to shew, that as all the Works of the Creator are equally esteem'd by Him, so they are, as in Justice they ought to be, equally us'd.

Sect. II. Of Pleasure and Pain

I. When a Creature is form'd and endu'd with Life, 'tis suppos'd to receive a Capacity of the Sensation of Uneasiness or Pain.

It is this distinguishes Life and Consciousness from unactive unconscious Matter. To know or be sensible of Suffering or being acted upon is to live; and whatsoever is not so, among created Things, is properly and truly dead.

All Pain and Uneasiness proceeds at first from and is caus'd by Somewhat without and distinct from the Mind itself. The Soul must first be acted upon before it can re-act. In the Beginning of Infancy it is as if it were not; it is not conscious of its own Existence, till it has receiv'd the first Sensation of Pain; then and not before, it begins to feel itself, is rous'd, and put into Action; then it discovers its Powers and Faculties, and exerts them to expel the Uneasiness. Thus is the Machine set on work; this is Life. We are first mov'd by Pain, and the whole succeeding Course of our Lives is but one continu'd Series of Action with a View to be freed from it. As fast as we have excluded one Uneasiness another appears, otherwise the Motion would cease. If a continual Weight is not apply'd, the Clock will stop. And as soon as the Avenues of Uneasiness to the Soul are choak'd up or cut off, we are dead, we think and act no more.

II. This Uneasiness, Whenever felt, produces Desire to be freed from it, great in exact proportion to the Uneasiness.

Thus it is Uneasiness the first Spring and Cause of all Action; for till we are uneasy in Rest, we can have no Desire to move, and without Desire of moving there can be no voluntary Motion. The Experience of every Man who has observ'd his own Actions will evince the Truth of this; and I think nothing need be said to prove that the Desire will be equal to the Uneasiness, for the very Thing implies as much: It is not Uneasiness unless we desire to be freed from it, nor a great Uneasiness unless the consequent Desire is great.

I might here observe, how necessary a Thing in the Order and Design of the Universe this Pain or Uneasiness is, and how beautiful in its Place! Let us but suppose it just now banish'd the World entirely, and consider the Consequence of it: All the Animal Creation would immediately stand stock still, exactly in the Posture they were in the Moment Uneasiness departed; not a Limb, not a Finger would henceforth move; we should all be reduc'd to the Condition of Statues, dull and unactive: Here I should continue to sit motionless with the Pen in my Hand thus—and neither leave my Seat nor write one Letter more. This may appear odd at first View, but a little Consideration will make it evident; for 'tis impossible to assign any other Cause for the voluntary
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Motion of an Animal than its uneasiness in Rest. What a different Appearance then would the Face of Nature make, without it! How necessary is it! And how unlikely that the Inhabitants of the World ever were, or that the Creator ever design'd they should be, exempt from it!

I would likewise observe here, that the VIIIth Proposition, in the preceding Section, viz. *That there is neither Merit nor Demerit, &c. is here again demonstrated, as infallibly, tho' in another manner: For since Freedom from Uneasiness is the End of all our Actions, how is it possible for us to do any Thing disinterested? How can any Action be meritorious of Praise or Dispraise, Reward or Punishment, when the natural Principle of Self-Love is the only and the irresistible Motive to it?*

III. *This Desire is always fulfill'd or satisfy'd.*

In the Design or End of it, tho' not in the Manner. The first is requisite, the latter not. To exemplify this, let us make a Supposition; A Person is confin'd in a House which appears to be in imminent Danger of Falling, this, as soon as perceiv'd, creates a violent Uneasiness, and that instantly produces an equal strong Desire, the End of which is freedom from the Uneasiness, and the Manner or Way propos'd to gain this End, is to get out of the House. Now if he is convinc'd by any Means, that he is mistaken, and the House is not likely to fall, he is immediately freed from his Uneasiness, and the End of his Desire is attain'd as well as if it had been in the Manner desir'd, viz. leaving the House.

All our different Desires and Passions proceed from and are reducible to this one Point, Uneasiness, tho' the Means we propose to ourselves for expelling of it are infinite. One proposes Fame, another Wealth, a third Power, &c. as the Means to gain this End; but tho' these are never attain'd, if the Uneasiness be remov'd by some other Means, the Desire is satisfy'd. Now during the Course of Life we are ourselves continually removing successive Uneasinesses as they arise, and the last we suffer is remov'd by the sweet Sleep of Death.

IV. *The fulfilling or Satisfaction of this Desire, produces the Sensation of Pleasure, great or small in exact proportion to the Desire.*

Pleasure is that Satisfaction which arises in the Mind upon, and is caus'd by, the accomplishment of our Desires, and by no other Means at all; and those Desires being above shewn to be caus'd by our Pains or Uneasinesses, it follows that Pleasure is wholly caus'd by Pain, and by no other Thing at all.

V. *Therefore the Sensation of Pleasure is equal, or in exact proportion to the Sensation of Pain.* As the Desire of being freed from Uneasiness is equal to the Uneasiness, and the Pleasure of satisfying that Desire equal to the Desire, the Pleasure thereby produc'd must necessarily be equal to the Uneasiness or Pain which produces it: Of three Lines, A, B, and C, if A is equal to B, and B to C, C must be equal to A. And as our Uneasinesses are always remov'd by some Means or other, it follows that Pleasure and Pain are in their Nature inseparable: So many Degrees as one Scale of the Ballance descends, so many exactly
the other ascends; and one cannot rise or fall without the Fall or Rise of the other: 'Tis impossible to taste of Pleasure, without feeling its preceding proportionate Pain; or to be sensible of Pain, without having its necessary Consequent Pleasure. The highest Pleasure is only Consciousness of Freedom from the deepest Pain, and Pain is not Pain to us unless we ourselves are sensible of it. They go Hand in Hand; they cannot be divided.

You have a View of the whole Argument in a few familiar Examples: The Pain of Abstinence from Food, as it is greater or less, produces a greater or less Desire of Eating, the Accomplishment of this Desire produces a greater or less Pleasure proportionate to it. The Pain of Confinement causes the Desire of Liberty, which accomplish'd, yields a Pleasure equal to that Pain of Confinement. The Pain of Labour and Fatigue causes the Pleasure of Rest, equal to that Pain. The Pain of Absence from Friends, produces the Pleasure of Meeting in exact proportion. &c.

This is the fixt Nature of Pleasure and Pain, and will always be found to be so by those who examine it.

One of the most common Arguments for the future Existence of the Soul, is taken from the generally suppos'd Inequality of Pain and Pleasure in the present; and this, notwithstanding the Difficulty by outward Appearances to make a Judgment of another's Happiness, has been look'd upon as almost unanswerable: but since Pain naturally and infallibly produces a Pleasure in proportion to it, every individual Creature must, in any State of Life, have an equal Quantity of each, so that there is not, on that Account, any Occasion for a future Adjustment.

Thus are all the Works of the Creator equally us'd by him; And no Condition of Life or Being is in itself better or preferable to another. The Monarch is not more happy than the Slave, nor the Beggar more miserable than Croesus. Suppose A, B, and C, three distinct Beings; A and B, animate, capable of Pleasure and Pain, C an inanimate Piece of Matter, insensible of either. A receives ten Degrees of Pain, which are necessarily succeeded by ten Degrees of Pleasure: B receives fifteen of Pain, and the consequent equal Number of Pleasure: Call the while lies unconcern'd, and as he has not suffer'd the former, has no right to the latter. What can be more equal and just than this? When the Accounts come to be adjusted, A has no Reason to complain that his Portion of Pleasure was five Degrees less than that of B, for his Portion of Pain was five Degrees less likewise: Nor has B any Reason to boast that his Pleasure was five Degrees greater than that of A, for his Pain was proportionate: They are then both on the same Foot with C, that is, they are neither Gainers nor Losers.

It will possibly be objected here, that even common Experience shews us, there is not in Fact this Equality: "Some we see hearty, brisk and cheerful perpetually, while others are constantly burden'd with a heavy Load of Maladies and Misfortunes, remaining for Years perhaps in Poverty, Disgrace, or
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Pain, and die at last without any Appearance of Recompense." Now tho' 'tis not necessary, when a Proposition is demonstrated to be a general Truth, to shew in what manner it agrees with the particular Circumstances of Persons, and indeed ought not to be requir'd; yet, as this is a common Objection, some Notice may be taken of it: And here let it be observ'd, that we cannot be proper Judges of the good or bad Fortune of Others; we are apt to imagine, that what would give us a great Uneasiness or a great Satisfaction, has the same Effect upon others: we think, for Instance, those unhappy, who must depend upon Charity for a mean Subsistence, who go in Rags, fare hardly, and are despis'd and scorn'd by all; not considering that Custom renders all these Things easy, familiar, and even pleasant. When we see Riches, Grandeur and a cheerfull Countenance, we easily imagine Happiness accompanies them, when oftentimes 'tis quite otherwise: Nor is a constantly sorrowful Look, attended with continual Complaints, an infallible Indication of Unhappiness. In short, we can judge by nothing but Appearances, and they are very apt to deceive us. Some put on a gay cheerful Outside, and appear to the World perfectly at Ease, tho' even then, some inward Sting, some secret Pain imbibers all their Joys, and makes the Ballance even: Others appear continually dejected and full of Sorrow; but even Grief itself is sometimes pleasant, and Tears are not always without their Sweetness: Besides, Some take a Satisfaction in being thought unhappy, (as others take a Pride in being thought humble,) these will paint their Misfortunes to others in the strongest Colours, and leave no Means unus'd to make you think them thoroughly miserable; so great a Pleasure it is to them to be pitied; Others retain the Form and outside Shew of Sorrow, long after the Thing itself, with its Cause, is remov'd from the Mind; it is a Habit they have acquir'd and cannot leave. These, with many others that might be given, are Reasons why we cannot make a true Estimate of the Equality of the Happiness and Unhappiness of others; and unless we could, Matter[s] of Fact cannot be opposed to this Hypothesis. Indeed, we are sometimes apt to think, that the Uneasinesses we ourselves have had, outweigh our Pleasures; but the Reason is this, the Mind takes no Account of the latter, they slip away unremark'd, when the former leave more lasting Impressions on the Memory. But suppose we pass the greatest part of Life in Pain and Sorrow, suppose we die by Torments and think no more, 'tis no diminution to the Truth of what is here advanc'd; for the Pain, tho' exquisite, is not so to the last Moments of Life, the Senses are soon benumb'd, and render'd incapable of transmitting it so sharply to the Soul as at first; She perceives it cannot hold long, and 'tis an exquisite Pleasure to behold the immediate Approaches of Rest. This makes an Equivalent tho' Annihilation should follow: For the Quantity of Pleasure and Pain is not to be measur'd by its Duration, any more than the Quantity of Matter by its Extension; and as one cubic Inch may be made to contain, by Condensation, as much Matter as would fill ten thousand cubic Feet, being
more expanded, so one single Moment of Pleasure may outweigh and compensate an Age of Pain.

It was owing to their Ignorance of the Nature of Pleasure and Pain that the Antient Heathens believ'd the idle Fable of their Elisium, that State of uninterrupted Ease and Happiness! The Thing is entirely impossible in Nature! Are not the Pleasures of the Spring made such by the Disagreeableness of the Winter? Is not the Pleasure of fair Weather owing to the Unpleasantness of foul? Certainly. Were it then always Spring, were the Fields always green and flourishing, and the Weather constantly serene and fair, the Pleasure would pall and die upon our Hands; it would cease to be Pleasure to us, when it is not usher'd in by Uneasiness. Could the Philosopher visit, in reality, every Star and Planet with as much Ease and Swiftness as he can now visit their Ideas, and pass from one to another of them in the Imagination; it would be a Pleasure I grant; but it would be only in proportion to the Desire of accomplishing it, and that would be no greater than the Uneasiness suffer'd in the Want of it. The Accomplishment of a long and difficult Journey yields a great Pleasure; but if we could take a Trip to the Moon and back again, as frequently and with as much Ease as we can go and come from Market, the Satisfaction would be just the same.

The Immateriality of the Soul has been frequently made use of as an Argument for its Immortality; but let us consider, that tho' it should be allow'd to be immaterial, and consequently its Parts incapable of Separation or Destruction by any Thing material, yet by Experience we find, that it is not incapable of Cessation of Thought, which is its Action. When the Body is but a little indispos'd it has an evident Effect upon the Mind; and a right Disposition of the Organs is requisite to a right Manner of Thinking. In a sound Sleep sometimes, or in a Swoon, we cease to think at all; tho' the Soul is not therefore than annihilated, but exists all the while tho' it does not act; and may not this probably be the Case after Death? All our Ideas are first admitted by the Senses and imprinted on the Brain, increasing in Number by Observation and Experience; there they become the Subjects of the Soul's Action. The Soul is a mere Power or Faculty of contemplating on, and comparing those Ideas when it has them; hence springs Reason: But as it can think on nothing but Ideas, it must have them before it can think at all. Therefore as it may exist before it has receiv'd any Ideas, it may exist before it thinks. To remember a Thing, is to have the Idea of it still plainly imprinted on the Brain, which the Soul can turn to and contemplate on Occasion. To forget a Thing, is to have the Idea of it defac'd and destroy'd by some Accident, or the crowding in and imprinting of great variety of other Ideas upon it, so that the Soul cannot find out its Traces and distinguish it. When we have thus lost the Idea of any one Thing, we can think no more, or cease to think, on that Thing; and as we can lose the Idea of one Thing, so we may of ten, twenty, a hundred, &c. and even of all Things, because they are not in their Nature permanent; and often during Life we see
that some Men, (by an Accident or Distemper affecting the Brain,) lose the greatest Part of their Ideas, and remember very little of their past Actions and Circumstances. Now upon Death, and the Destruction of the Body, the Ideas contain'd in the Brain, (which are alone the Subjects of the Soul's Action) being then likewise necessarily destroy'd, the Soul, tho' incapable of Destruction itself, must then necessarily cease to think or act, having nothing left to think or act upon. It is reduc'd to its first unconscious State before it receiv'd any Ideas. And to cease to think is but little different from ceasing to be.

Nevertheless, 'tis not impossible that this same Faculty of contemplating Ideas may be hereafter united to a new Body, and receive a new Set of Ideas; but that will no way concern us who are now living; for the Identity will be lost, it is no longer that same Self but a new Being.

I shall here subjoin a short Recapitulation of the Whole, that it may with all its Parts be comprehended at one View.

1. It is suppos'd that God the Maker and Governor of the Universe, is infinitely wise, good, and powerful.
2. In consequence of his infinite Wisdom and Goodness, it is asserted, that whatever He doth must be infinitely wise and good.
3. Unless He be interrupted, and His Measures broken by some other Being, which is impossible because He is Almighty.
4. In consequence of His infinite Power, it is asserted, that nothing can exist or be done in the Universe which is not agreeable to His Will, and therefore good.
5. Evil is hereby excluded, with all Merit and Demerit; and likewise all preference in the Esteem of God, of one Part of the Creation to another. This is the Summary of the first Part.

Now our common Notions of Justice will tell us, that if all created Things are equally esteem'd by the Creator, they ought to be equally us'd by Him; and that they are therefore equally us'd, we might embrace for Truth upon the Credit, and as the true Consequence of the foregoing Argument. Nevertheless we proceed to confirm it, by shewing how they are equally us'd, and that in the following Manner.

1. A Creature when endu'd with Life or Consciousness, is made capable of Uneasiness or Pain.
2. This Pain produces Desire to be freed from it, in exact proportion to itself.
3. The Accomplishment of this Desire produces an equal pleasure.
4. Pleasure is consequently equal to Pain.

From these Propositions it is observ'd,
1. That every Creature hath as much Pleasure as Pain.
2. That Life is not preferable to Insensibility; for Pleasure and Pain destroy one another: That Being which has ten Degrees of Pain subtracted from ten of Pleasure, has nothing remaining, and is upon an equality with that Being which is insensible of both.
3. As the first Part proves that all Things must be equally us’d by the Creator
because equally esteem’d; so this second Part demonstrates that they are equally
esteem’d because equally us’d.

4. Since every Action is the Effect of Self-Uneasiness, the Distinction of Virtue
and Vice is excluded; and Prop. VIII. in Sect. I. again demonstrated.

5. No State of Life can be happier than the present, because Pleasure and Pain
are inseparable.

Thus both Parts of this Argument agree with and confirm one another, and
the Demonstration is reciprocal.

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

Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion (1728)
Written just three short years after the Dissertation, Franklin’s Articles of Belief
and Acts of Religion reflects his subsequent distrust of “metaphysical reasoning,”
his increasing preoccupation with ethical issues, his dissatisfaction with orthodox
Christianity, and his faith in the deistic God of nature and reason. “Disgusted,”
as he tells us in the Autobiography, with the rigidly sectarian and exclusively
scriptural sermons of Calvinist ministers, Franklin ceased his intermittent atten­
dance of one of Philadelphia’s Presbyterian churches and wrote the Articles and
Acts as a guide for his own private worship and contemplation. As he laconically
notes, “I [turn’d] to the Use of [the Articles], and went no more to the public
Assemblies.”

While the Dissertation is a dispassionate exercise in logical speculation, the
Articles and Acts is a deeply personal statement of Franklin’s deistic sympathies. It
stresses a pragmatic religion of nature in which orderliness, moral rectitude, self­
improvement, and rational devotion are the keynotes. Franklin deliberately
avoids references to Christian dogma, instead substituting humanistic expressions
of confidence in a lawlike and benevolent deity. The liturgical readings he selects
are culled from poets and liberal theologians, not from Scripture or the West­
minster Confession. The Articles and Acts, in short, is the catechism of a man who
has renounced orthodox Christianity as well as dogmatic materialism. It is one of
the most touching and succinct of all deistic creeds.

One feature of Franklin’s liturgy has especially exercised the imagination and
ingenuity of subsequent commentators: its suggestion that the “Author and Fa-
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er" of all creation has "created many Beings or Gods," each having "for himself one glorious Sun, attended with a beautiful and admirable System of Planets." It is difficult and perhaps impossible at this point to determine how seriously Franklin took this polytheistic tenet or from where he might have derived it. The statement is reminiscent of Plato's account in the Timaeus of the Demiurge's creation of a plurality of lesser gods, but there is no conclusive evidence that Franklin was acquainted with this particular dialogue. A more likely explanation of the notion's source would be Franklin's familiarity with the works of thinkers such as John Ray, Richard Blackmore, and Archbishop Fénélon (mentioned in the Articles and Acts), all of whom theorized about the possibility of multiple gods corresponding to multiple worlds. At any rate, the polytheistic speculations in Franklin's private catechism rarely reemerge in his subsequent writings. Its expression of deistic belief in a "wise and good God, who is the Author of our [rational] System" is, on the other hand, a constant theme.

The Articles and Acts presumably consisted of two distinct sections. The second part, if Franklin ever actually wrote it, is now missing.

First Principles

I Believe there is one Supreme most perfect Being, Author and Father of the Gods themselves.

For I believe that Man is not the most perfect Being but One, rather that as there are many Degrees of Beings his Inferiors, so there are many Degrees of Beings superior to him.

Also, when I stretch my imagination thro' and beyond our System of Planets, beyond the visible fix'd Stars themselves, into that Space that is every Way infinite, and conceive it fill'd with Suns like ours, each with a Chorus of Worlds for ever moving round him, then this little Ball on which we move, seems, even in my narrow Imagination, to be almost Nothing, and my selfless than nothing, and of no sort of Consequence.

When I think thus, I imagine it great Vanity in me to suppose that the Supremely Perfect, does in the least regard such an inconsiderable Nothing as Man. More especially, since it is impossible for me to have any positive clear Idea of that which is infinite and incomprehensible, I cannot conceive otherwise, than that He, the infinite Father, expects or requires no Worship or Praise from us, but that he is even INFINITELY ABOVE IT.

But since there is in all Men something like a natural Principle which enclines them to Devotion or the Worship of some unseen Power;

And since Men are endued with Reason superior to all other Animals that we are in our World acquainted with;

Therefore I think it seems required of me, and my Duty, as a Man, to pay Divine Regards to SOMETHING.

I CONCEIVE then, that the INFINITE has created many Beings or Gods, vastly
superior to Man, who can better conceive his Perfections than we, and return
him a more rational and glorious Praise. As among Men, the Praise of the
Ignorant or of Children, is not regarded by the ingenious Painter or Architect,
who is honour’d and pleas’d with the Approbation of Wise men and Artists.

It may be that these created Gods, are immortal, or it may be that after
many Ages, they are changed, and Others supply their Places.

Howbeit, I conceive that each of these is exceeding wise, and good, and
very powerful; and that Each has made for himself, one glorious Sun, attended
with a beautiful and admirable System of Planets.

It is that particular wise and good God, who is the Author and Owner of
our System, that I propose for the Object of my Praise and Adoration.

For I conceive that he has in himself some of those Passions he has planted
in us, and that, since he has given us Reason whereby we are capable of observ­
ing his Wisdom in the Creation, he is not above caring for us, being pleas’d
with our Praise, and offended when we slight Him, or neglect his Glory.

I conceive for many Reasons that he is a good Being, and as I should be
happy to have so wise, good and powerful a Being my Friend, let me consider
in what Manner I shall make myself most acceptable to him.

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 Virtu­
ous, because he is pleas’d when he sees me Happy.

And since he has created many Things which seem purely design’d for the
Delight of Man, I believe he is not offended when he sees his Children solace
themselves in any manner of pleasant Exercises and innocent Delights, and I
think no Pleasure innocent that is to Man hurtful.

I love him therefore for his Goodness and I adore him for his Wisdom.

Let me then not fail to praise my God continually, for it is his Due, and it
is all I can return for his many Favours and great Goodness to me; and let me
resolve to be virtuous, that I may be happy, that I may please Him, who is
delighted to see me happy. Amen.

1. Adoration

2. Petition.

3. Thanks.

Prel. Being mindful that before I address the Deity, my soul ought to
be calm and Serene, free from Passion and Perturbation, or other­
wise elevated with Rational Joy and Pleasure, I ought to use a
Countenance that expresses a filial Respect, mixt with a kind of
Smiling, that signifies inward Joy, and Satisfaction, and Admiration.
O wise God,
   My good Father,
Thou beholdest the Sincerity of my Heart,
   And of my Devotion;
Grant me a Continuance of thy Favour!

   (1)
Powerful Goodness, &c.
O Creator, O Father, I believe that thou art Good, and that thou art pleas’d
with the Pleasure of thy Children.
   Praised be thy Name for ever.

   (2)
By thy Power hast thou made the glorious Sun, with his attending Worlds;
from the Energy of thy mighty Will they first received their prodigious Motion,
and by the Wondrous Laws by which they move.
   Praised be thy Name for ever.

   (3)
By thy Wisdom hast thou formed all Things, Thou hast created Man, bestow­
ing Life and Reason, and plac’d him in Dignity superior to thy other earthly
Creatures.
   Praised be thy Name for ever.

   (4)
Thy wisdom, thy Power, and thy GOODNESS are every where clearly seen; in the
Air and in the Water, in the Heavens and on the Earth; Thou providest for the
various winged Fowl, and the innumerable Inhabitants of the Water; Thou
givest Cold and heat, Rain and Sunshine in their Season, and to the Fruits of
the Earth Increase.
   Praised be thy Name for ever.

   (5)
I believe thou hast given Life to thy Creatures that they might Live, and art not
delighted with violent Death and bloody Sacrifices.
   Praised be thy Name for ever.

   (6)
Thou abhorrest in thy Creatures Treachery and Deceit, Malice, Revenge, In­
temperance and every other hurtful Vice; but Thou art a Lover of Justice and
Sincerity, of Friendship, Benevolence and every Virtue. Thou art my Friend,
my Father, and my Benefactor.
   Praised be thy Name, O God, for ever.
   Amen.
After this, it will not be improper to read part of some such Book as Ray's *Wisdom of God in the Creation* or Blackmore on the Creation, or the Archbishop of Cambray's *Demonstration of the Being of a God*;* &c. or else spend some Minutes in a serious Silence, contemplating on those Subjects.

Then Sing

Milton's Hymn to the Creator**

These are thy Glorious Works, Parent of Good!
Almighty: Thine this Universal Frame,
Thus wondrous fair! Thy self how wondrous then!
Speak ye who best can tell, Ye Sons of Light,
Angels, for ye behold him, and with Songs,
And Choral Symphonies, Day without Night
Circle his Throne rejoicing. You in Heav'n,
On Earth, join all Ye Creatures to extol
Him first, him last, him midst and without End.
Fairest of Stars, last in the Train of Night,
If rather thou belong'st not to the Dawn,
Sure Pledge of Day! That crown'st the smiling Morn
With thy bright Circlet; Praise him in thy Sphere
While Day arises, that sweet Hour of Prime.
Thou Sun, of this Great World both Eye and Soul
Acknowledge Him thy Greater, Sound his Praise
In thy Eternal Course; both when thou climb'st,
And when high Noon hast gain'd, and when thou fall'st.
Moon! that now meet'st the orient Sun, now fly'st
With the fix'd Stars, fix'd in their Orb that flies,
And ye five other Wandering Fires, that move
In mystic Dance, not without Song, resound
His Praise, that out of Darkness call'd up Light.
Air! and ye Elements! the Eldest Birth
Of Nature's Womb, that in Quaternion run


Perpetual Circle, multiform; and mix
And nourish all Things, let your ceaseless Change
Vary to our great Maker still new Praise.
Yc Mists and Exhalations! that now rise
From Hill or steaming Lake, dusky or grey,
Till the Sun paint your fleecy Skirts with Gold,
In Honour to the World's Great Author rise.
Whether to deck with Clouds th' uncolour'd Sky
Or wet the thirsty Earth with falling show'rs,
Rising or falling still advance his Praise.
His Praise, ye Winds! that from 4 Quarters blow,
Breathe soft or loud; and wave your Tops ye Pines!
With every Plant, in Sign of Worship wave.
Fountains! and ye that warble as ye flow
Melodious Murmurs, warbling tune his Praise.
Join Voices all ye living Souls, ye Birds!
That singing, up to Heav'n's high Gate ascend,
Bear on your Wings, and in your Notes his Praise.
Ye that in Waters glide! and ye that walk
The Earth! and stately Tread, or lowly Creep;
Witness if I be silent, Ev'n or Morn,
To Hill or Valley, Fountain or Fresh Shade,
Made Vocal by my Song, and taught his Praise.

Here follows the Reading of some Book or part of a Book
Discoursing on and exciting to MORAL VIRTUE

Petition

Prel. In as much as by Reason of our Ignorance We cannot be Certain
that many Things Which we often hear mentioned in the Petitions
of Men to the Deity, would prove REAL GOODS if they were in our Possession, and as I have Reason to hope and believe that the Goodness of my Heavenly Father will not withhold from me a suitable Share of Temporal Blessings, if by a VIRTUOUS and HOLY Life I merit his Favour and Kindness, Therefore I presume not to ask such Things, but rather Humbly, and with a sincere Heart express my earnest Desires that he would graciously assist my Continual Endeavours and Resolutions of eschewing Vice and embracing Virtue; Which kind of Supplications will at least be thus far beneficial, as they remind me in a solemn manner of my Extensive DUTY.
Benjamin Franklin

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That I may be preserved from Atheism and Infidelity, Impiety and Profaneness, and in my Addresses to Thee carefully avoid Irreverence and Ostentation, Formality and odious Hypocrisy,

Help me, O Father

That I may be loyal to my Prince, and faithful to my Country, careful for its Good, valiant in its Defence, and Obedient to its Laws, abhorring Treason as much as Tyranny,

Help me, O Father

That I may to those above me be dutiful, humble, and submissive, avoiding Pride, disrespect and Contumacy,

Help me, O Father

That I may to those below me, be gracious, Condescending and Forgiving, using Clemency, protecting Innocent Distress, avoiding Cruelty, Harshness and Oppression, Insolence and unreasonable Severity,

Help me, O Father

That I may refrain from Calumny and Detraction; that I may avoid and abhor Deceit and Envy, Fraud, Flattery and Hatred, Malice, Lying and Ingratitude,

Help me, O Father

That I may be sincere in Friendship, faithful in Trust, and impartial in Judgment, watchful against Pride, and against Anger (that momentary Madness),

Help me, O Father

That I may be just in all my Dealings and temperate in my Pleasures, full of Candour and Ingenuity, Humanity and Benevolence,

Help me, O Father

That I may be grateful to my Benefactors and generous to my Friends, exerting Charity and Liberality to the Poor, and Pity to the Miserable,

Help me, O Father

That I may avoid Avarice, Ambition, and Intemperance, Luxury and Lasciviousness,

Help me, O Father

That I may possess Integrity and Evenness of Mind, Resolution in Difficulties, and Fortitude under Affliction; that I may be punctual in performing my Promises, peaceable and prudent in my Behaviour,

Help me, O Father

That I may have Tenderness for the Weak, and a reverent Respect for the Ancient; that I may be kind to my Neighbours, good-natured to my Companions, and hospitable to Strangers,

Help me, O Father

That I may be averse to Craft and Overreaching, abhor Extortion, Perjury, and every kind of Wickedness,

Help me, O Father
That I may be honest and Openhearted, gentle, merciful and Good, cheerful in Spirit, rejoicing in the Good of Others, 

Help me, O Father

That I may have a constant Regard to Honour and Probity; that I may possess a perfect Innocence and a good Conscience, and at length become Truly Virtuous and Magnanimous,

Help me, Good God,

Help me, O Father

And forasmuch as Ingratitude is one of the most odious of Vices, let me not be unmindful gratefully to acknowledge the Favours I receive from Heaven.

Thanks.

For Peace and Liberty, for Food and Raiment, for Corn and Wine, and Milk, and every kind of Healthful Nourishment,

Good God, I Thank thee.

For the Common Benefits of Air and Light, for useful Fire and delicious Water,

Good God, I Thank thee.

For Knowledge and Literature and every useful Art; for my Friends and their Prosperity, and for the fewness of my Enemies,

Good God, I Thank thee.

For all thy innumerable Benefits; for Life and Reason, and the Use of Speech, for Health and Joy and every Pleasant Hour,

Good God, I Thank thee. . . .

Doctrine to Be Preached (1731)

Franklin describes himself in his Autobiography as an inveterate scribbler of private reflections, passing thoughts, and outlines of planned (but often never written) works. This selection, probably composed in 1731, appears to have been a memorandum Franklin intended to work up into a public discourse—possibly to be delivered at a meeting of the Philadelphia Junto Society, which Franklin had founded in 1727. It is not known whether he actually “preached” this doctrine at some time, but the memo reemerged some forty years later in abbreviated form in the Autobiography (see selections from the Autobiography, below).

The piece is an encapsulated account of Franklin’s deistic orientation, stressing the rational imperatives of virtue and knowledge.

That there is one God Father of the Universe.
That he [is] infinitely good, Powerful and wise.
Benjamin Franklin

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 Ignorance dissipated.
That none but the Virtuous are wise.
That Man's Perfection is in Virtue.

On the Providence of God in the Government of the World (1732)

On the Providence of God, which Franklin recorded in his Commonplace Book, appears to be the draft of a speech he delivered or intended to deliver to his "Pot Companions" of the Junto Society.

The essay is interesting on several counts. First, it indicates how far Franklin had retreated by 1732 from his earlier denial in the Dissertation of human freedom. In this piece, he still considers the deity to be all-powerful and supremely good, but he now thinks it reasonable to suppose that since God is also infinitely free—that is, totally unconstrained by externalities—he imparts a spark of divine freedom (along with power and goodness) to the creatures made in his image.

Moreover, Franklin argues that the omnibenevolent nature of God is such that he neither arbitrarily predestines certain individuals to eternal damnation and others to eternal bliss—a clear jab at Calvinism—nor totally distances himself from creation by leaving humans to the whimsy of chance. Neither course of action would be worthy of a deity who is supremely wise, good, and powerful. Instead, Franklin concludes that, given the "Power of the Deity," the only rational account of his relationship to creation is that he occasionally "interferes by his particular Providence and sets aside the Effects which would otherwise have been produced."

It is not at all clear how we are to read this passage. If by "interferes by his particular Providence" Franklin means the deity directly intervenes in the system of physical laws he has established—thereby, for example, magically preventing otherwise inevitable natural disasters such as earthquakes—then he seems to have stepped out of character, offering a most undeistic and obviously Calvinist doctrine of miracles and special providences. But there is no reason to suppose this is what Franklin had in mind. Instead, it seems more plausible to interpret his argument as a defense of the assumption that divine providence can sway, without
necessarily coercing, human sentiment away from evil and toward virtue. It is
significant, for example, that the illustration with which Franklin highlights his
point is a political rather than physical one: God’s infinite goodness can prompt
him to interfere with wicked ambitions in such a way as to “deliver” an oppressed
but righteous nation from the grip of a “cruel Tyrant.” This interpretation of
providence allows Franklin, in typical deistic fashion, to salvage divine power and
goodness without sacrificing either human freedom or the mechanistic orderliness
of the physical realm. At any rate, his rather murky attempt to accentuate the
benevolence of the deity, even to the extent of pushing himself into a corner possibly
incompatible with his deism, only underscores Franklin’s growing preoccupation
with ethical matters.

Finally, it should be noted that Franklin’s discussion of divine attributes as
well as providence is based on inductive extrapolations from experience. Like all
deists, he was intensely suspicious of a priori metaphysical speculation or ecclesial
(and supposedly revealed) authority, believing instead that knowledge of the deity
is best gleaned from an examination of the “book of nature.” His analysis of di­
vine providence, as he says, is not founded on “The Authority of any Books or Men
how sacred soever; because I know that no Authority is more convincing to Men of
Reason than the Authority of Reason itself.”

When I consider my own Weakness, and the discerning Judgment of those
who are to be my Audience, I cannot help blaming my self considerably, for
this rash Undertaking of mine, it being a Thing I am altogether ill practis’d in
and very much unqualified for; I am especially discouraged when I reflect that
you are all my intimate Pot Companions who have heard me say a 1000 silly
Things in Conversations, and therefore have not that laudable Partiality and
Veneration for whatever I shall deliver that Good people commonly have for
their Spiritual Guides; that You have no Reverence for my Habit, nor for the
Sanctity of my Countenance; that you do not believe me inspir’d or divinely
assisted, and therefore will think your Selves at Liberty to assent or dissent,
agree or disagree, of any Thing I advance, canvassing and sighing it as the private
Opinion of one of your Acquaintance. These are great Disadvantages and
Discouragements but I am enter’d and must proceed, humbly requesting your
Patience and Attention.

I propose at this Time to discourse on the Subject of our last Conversation:
The Providence of God in the Government of the World. I shall not attempt
to amuse you with Flourishes of Rhetorick, were I master of that deceitful
Science because I know ye are Men of substantial Reason and can easily discern
between sound Argument and the false Glosses of Oratory; nor shall I en­
deavor to impose on your Ears, by a musical Accent in delivery, in the Tone of
one violently affected with what he says; for well I know that ye are far from
being superstitious [or] fond of unmeaning Noise, and that ye believe a Thing to be no more true for being sung than said. I intend to offer you nothing but plain Reasoning, devoid of Art and Ornament; unsupported by the Authority of any Books or Men how sacred soever; because I know that no Authority is more convincing to Men of Reason than the Authority of Reason itself. It might be judg'd an Affront to your Understandings should I go about to prove this first Principle, the Existence of a Deity and that he is the Creator of the Universe, for that would suppose you ignorant of what all Mankind in all Ages have agreed in. I shall therefore proceed to observe: 1. That he must be a Being of great Wisdom; 2. That he must be a Being of great Goodness and 3. That he must be a Being of great Power. That he must be a Being of infinite Wisdom, appears in his admirable Order and Disposition of Things, whether we consider the heavenly bodies, the Stars and Planets, and their wonderful regular Motions, or this Earth compounded of such an Excellent mixture of all the Elements; or the admirable Structure of Animal Bodies of such infinite Variety, and yet every one adapted to its Nature, and the Way of Life it is to be placed in, whether on Earth, in the Air or in the Waters, and so exactly that the highest and most exquisite human Reason, cannot find a fault and say this would have been better so or in another Manner, which whoever considers attentively and thoroughly will be astonish'd and swallow'd up in Admiration.

2. That the Deity is a Being of great Goodness, appears in his giving Life to so many Creatures, each of which acknowledge it a Benefit by their unwillingness to leave it; in his providing plentiful Sustenance for them all, and making those Things that are most useful, most common and easy to be had; such as Water necessary for almost every Creature's Drink; Air without which few could subsist, the inexpressible Benefits of Light and Sunshine to almost all Animals in general; and to Men the most useful Vegetables, such as Corn, the most useful of Metals as Iron, and the most useful Animals, as Horses, Oxen and Sheep, he has made easiest to raise, or procure in Quantity or Numbers: each of which particulars if considered seriously and carefully would fill us with the highest Love and Affection. 3. That he is a Being of infinite Power appears, in his being able to form and compound such Vast Masses of Matter as this Earth and the Sun and innumerable Planets and Stars, and give them such prodigious Motion, and yet so to govern them in their greatest Velocity as that they shall not flie off out of their appointed Bounds nor dash one against another, to their mutual Destruction; but 'tis easy to conceive his Power, when we are convinc'd of his infinite Knowledge and Wisdom; for if weak and foolish Creatures as we are, by knowing the Nature of a few Things can produce such wonderful Effects; such as for instance by knowing the Nature only of Nitre and Sea Salt mix'd we can make a Water which will dissolve the hardest Iron and by adding one Ingredient more, can make another Water which will dissolve Gold and render the most Solid Bodies fluid—and by knowing the Na-
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ture of Salt Peter Sulphur and Charcoal those mean Ingredients mix'd we can shake the Air in the most terrible Manner, destroy Ships Houses and Men at a Distance and in an Instant, overthrow Cities, rend Rocks into a Thousand Pieces, and level the highest Mountains. What Power must he possess who not only knows the Nature of every Thing in the Universe, but can make Things of new Natures with the greatest Ease and at his Pleasure!

Agreeing then that the World was at first made by a Being of infinite Wisdom, Goodness and Power, which Being we call God; The State of Things ever since and at this Time must be in one of these four following manners, viz.

1. Either he unchangeably decreed and appointed every Thing that comes to pass; and left nothing to the Course [of] Nature, nor allow'd any Creature free agency, or

2. Without decreeing any thing, he left all to general Nature and the Events of Free Agency in his Creatures, which he never alters or interrupts,

3. He decreed some Things unchangeable, and left others to general Nature and the Events of Free Agency, which also he never alters or interrupts; or

4. He sometimes interferes by his particular Providence and sets aside the Effects which would otherwise have been produced by any of the Above Causes.

I shall endeavour to shew the first 3 Suppositions to be inconsistent with the common Light of Reason; and that the 4th is most agreeable to it, and therefore most probably true.

In the 1. place. If you say he has in the Beginning unchangeably decreed all Things and left Nothing to Nature or free Agency. These Strange Conclusions will necessarily follow; 1. That he is now no more a God. 'Tis true indeed, before he had made such unchangeable Decree, he was a Being of Power, Almighty; but now having determin'd every Thing, he has divested himself of all further Power, he has done and has no more to do, he has ty'd up his Hands, and has now no greater Power than an Idol of Wood or Stone; nor can there be any more Reason for praying to him or worshipping of him, than of such an Idol for the Worshippers can never [be] the better for such Worship. Then 2. he has decreed some things contrary to the very Notion of a wise and good Being; Such as that some of his Creatures or Children shall do all Manner of Injury to others and bring every kind of Evil upon them without Cause; that some of them shall even blaspheme him their Creator in the most horrible manner; and, which is still more highly absurd that he has decreed the greatest Part of Mankind, shall in all Ages, put up their earnest Prayers to him both in private and publicly in great Assemblies, when all the while he had so determin'd their Fate that he could not possibly grant them any Benefits on that Account, nor could such Prayers be any way available. When then should he ordain them to make such Prayers? It cannot be imagined they are of any Service to him. Surely it is not more difficult to believe the World was made by
a God of Wood or Stone, than that the God who made the World should be such a God as this.

In the 2. Place. If you say he has decreed nothing but left all things to general Nature, and the Events of Free Agency, which he never alters or interrupts. Then these Conclusions will follow; He must either utterly hide himself from the Works of his Hands, and take no Notice at all of their Proceedings natural or moral; or he must be as undoubtedly he is, a Spectator of every thing; for there can be no Reason or Ground to suppose the first—I say there can be no Reason to imagine he would make so glorious a Universe merely to abandon it. In this Case imagine the Deity looking on and beholding the Ways of his Creatures; some Heroes in Virtue he sees are incessantly indeavouring the Good of others, they labour thro vast difficulties, they suffer incredible Hardships and Miseries to accomplish this End, in hopes to please a Good God, and obtain his Favour, which they earnestly Pray for; what Answer can he make them within himself but this; take the Reward Chance may give you, I do not intermeddle in these Affairs; he sees others continually doing all manner of Evil, and bringing by their Actions Misery and Destruction among Mankind: What can he say here but this, if Chance rewards you I shall not punish you, I am not to be concerned. He sees the just, the innocent and the Beneficent in the Hands of the wicked and violent Oppressor; and when the good are at the Brink of Destruction they pray to him, thou, O God, art mighty and powerful to save; help us we beseech thee: He answers, I cannot help you, ’tis none of my Business nor do I at all regard these things. How is it possible to believe a wise and an infinitely Good Being can be delighted in this Circumstance; and be utterly unconcern’d what becomes of the Beings and Things he has created; for thus, we must believe him idle and unactive, and that his glorious Attributes of Power, Wisdom and Goodness are no more to be made use of.

In the Third Place. If you say he has decreed some things and left others to the Events of Nature and Free Agency, Which he never alters or interrupts; Still you unGod him, if I may be allow’d the Expression; he has nothing to do; he can cause us neither Good nor harm; he is no more to be regarded than a lifeless Image, than Dagon, or Baal, or Bell and the Dragon; and as in both the other Suppositions foregoing, that Being which from its Power is most able to Act, from its Wisdom knows best how to act, and from its Goodness would always certainly act best, is in this Opinion supposed to become the most unactive of all Beings and remain everlastingly Idle; an Absurdity, which when considered or but barely seen, cannot be swallowed without doing the greatest Violence to common Reason, and all the Faculties of the Understanding.

We are then necessarily driven into the fourth Supposition, That the Deity sometimes interferes by his particular Providence, and sets aside the Events which would otherwise have been produc’d in the Course of Nature, or by the Free Agency of Men; and this is perfectly agreeable with what we can know of
his Attributes and Perfections: But as some may doubt whether 'tis possible there should be such a Thing as free Agency in Creatures; I shall just offer one Short Argument on that Account and proceed to shew how the duties of Religion necessarily follow the Belief of a Providence. You acknowledge that God is infinitely Powerful, Wise and Good, and also a free Agent; and you will not deny that he has communicated to us part of his Wisdom, Power and Goodness; i.e. he has made us in some Degree Wise, potent and good; and is it then impossible for him to communicate any Part of his Freedom, and make us also in some Degree Free? Is not even his infinite Power sufficient for this? I should be glad to hear what Reason any Man can give for thinking in that Manner; 'tis sufficient for me to shew tis not impossible, and no Man I think can shew 'tis improbable, but much more might be offer'd to demonstrate clearly that Men are in some Degree free Agents, and accountable for their Actions; however, this I may possibly reserve for another Discourse hereafter if I find Occasion.

Lastly If God does not sometimes interfere by his Providence tis either because he cannot, or because he will not; which of these Positions will you choose? There is a righteous Nation grievously oppress'd by a cruel Tyrant, they earnestly intreat God to deliver them; If you say he cannot, you deny his infinite Power, which at first acknowledg'd; if you say he will not, you must directly deny his infinite Goodness. You are then of necessity oblig'd to allow, that 'tis highly reasonable to believe a Providence because tis highly absurd to believe otherwise.

Now if tis unreasonable to suppose it out of the Power of the Deity to help and favour us particularly or that we are out of his Hearing or Notice or that Good Actions do not procure more of his Favour than ill Ones. Then I conclude, that believing a Providence we have the Foundation of all true Religion; for we should love and revere that Deity for his Goodness and thank him for his Benefits; we should adore him for his Wisdom, fear him for his Power, and pray to him for his Favour and Protection; and this Religion will be a Powerful Regulator of our Actions, give us Peace and Tranquility within our own Minds, and render us Benevolent, Useful and Beneficial to others.

Self-Denial Not the Essence of Virtue (1735)
This short piece of Franklin's appeared anonymously in his Pennsylvania Gazette. That the "correspondent" is actually Franklin himself is indicated by a passage in his Autobiography in which he confesses that from time to time the Gazette ran "little Pieces of my own which had been first compos'd for Reading in our Junto." One of these journalistic squibs was "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 Inclination."

Self-Denial Not the Essence of Virtue is vintage Franklin. In it we see him
once again hammering away at what he takes to be irrational Christian dogma—in this case, the ethical excellence of asceticism—and offering as a normative substitute a quite Aristotelian analysis of virtue as rational habituation to good actions. What is of moral significance for Franklin is pragmatic consequence, not the purity (or lack thereof) of intention. The assumption that ethical actions are utility-laden and promotive of the commonweal is characteristic of deism.

Franklin’s publication of this piece on self-denial was probably intended as much to raise hackles as to instruct and edify. Whether it succeeded in the latter goal is unknown, but it certainly accomplished the former, prompting an indignant response in the 4 March issue of the American Weekly Mercury. We also know that Franklin took to heart his definition of virtue as habituation to good deeds. His self-imposed “program for arriving at moral perfection,” described in the Autobiography, had its origins in precisely this analysis (see selections from the Autobiography, below).

To the Printer of the Gazette.

That self-denial is not the essence of virtue.

It is commonly asserted, that without Self-Denial there is no Virtue, and that the greater the Self-Denial the greater the Virtue.

If it were said, that he who cannot deny himself in any thing he inclines to, tho’ he knows it will be to his hurt, has not the Virtue of Resolution or Fortitude, it would be intelligible enough; but as it stands it seems obscure or erroneous.

Let us consider some of the Virtues singly.

If a Man has no inclination to wrong People in his Dealings, if he feels no Temptation to it, and therefore never does it; can it be said that he is not a just Man? If he is a just Man, has he not the Virtue of Justice?

If to a certain Man, idle Diversions have nothing in them that is tempting, and therefore he never relaxes his Application to Business for their Sake; is he not an Industrious Man? Or has he not the Virtue of Industry?

I might in like manner instance in all the rest of the Virtues: But to make the Thing short, As it is certain, that the more we strive against the Temptation to any Vice, and practise the contrary Virtue, the weaker will that Temptation be, and the stronger will be that Habit; ’till at length the Temptation has no Force, or entirely vanishes: Does it follow from thence, that in our Endeavours to overcome Vice, we grow continually less and less Virtuous; till at length we have no Virtue at all?

If Self-Denial be the Essence of Virtue, then it follows, that the Man who is naturally temperate, just, &c. is not virtuous; but that in order to be virtuous,
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he must, in spite of his natural Inclinations, wrong his Neighbours, and eat and drink, &c. to excess.

But perhaps it may be said, that by the Word Virtue in the above Assertion, is meant, Merit; and so it should stand thus; Without Self-Denial there is no Merit; and the greater the Self-Denial the greater the Merit.

The Self-denial here meant, must be when our Inclinations are towards Vice, or else it would still be Nonsense.

By Merit is understood, Desert; and when we say a Man merits, we mean that he deserves Praise or Reward.

We do not pretend to merit any thing of God, for he is above our Services; and the Benefits he confers on us, are the Effects of his Goodness and Bounty.

All our Merit then is with regard to one another, and from one to another.

Taking then the Assertion as it last stands,

If a Man does me a Service from a natural benevolent Inclination, does he deserve less of me than another who does me the like Kindness against his Inclination?

If I have two Journeymen, one naturally industrious, the other idle, but both perform a Days Work equally good, ought I to give the latter the most Wages?

Indeed, lazy Workmen are commonly observ’d to be more extravagant in their Demands than the Industrious; for if they have not more for their Work, they cannot live so well: But tho’ it be true to a Proverb, That Lazy Folks take the most Pains, does it follow that they deserve the most Money?

If you were to employ Servants in Affairs of Trust, would you not bid more for one you knew was naturally honest, than for one naturally roguish, but who had lately acted honestly? For Currents whose natural Channel is damm’d up, (till the new Course is by Time worn sufficiently deep and become natural,) are apt to break their Banks. If one Servant is more valuable than another, has he not more Merit than the other? And yet this is not on Account of Superior Self-denyal.

Is a Patriot not praise-wor thy, if Publick Spirit is natural to him?

Is a Pacing-Horse less valuable for being a natural Pacer?

Nor in my Opinion has any Man less Merit for having in general natural virtuous Inclinations.

The Truth is, that Temperance, Justice, Charity, &c. are Virtues, whether practis’d with or against our Inclinations; and the Man who practises them, merits our Love and Esteem: And Self-denial is neither good nor bad, but as ’tis apply’d: He that denies a Vicious Inclination is Virtuous in proportion to his Resolution, but the most perfect Virtue is above all Temptation, such as the Virtue of the Saints in Heaven: And he who does a foolish, indecent or wicked Thing, merely because ’tis contrary to his Inclination, (like some mad Enthu-
siasts I have read of, who ran about naked, under the Notion of taking up the Cross) is not practising the reasonable Science of Virtue, but is lunatick.

Dialogue between Two Presbyterians (1735)

Franklin ran this composition in his Pennsylvania Gazette on 10 April 1735, signing it simply “A.B.C.D.” There was good reason for the anonymity. This is one of Franklin’s strongest published denunciations of Calvinist doctrine and sectarian parochialism. Although militant deists such as Paine and Palmer later penned criticisms of orthodoxy that make the Dialogue seem mild in comparison, its publication was a bold move for the moderate Franklin. (At the risk of sounding uncharitable, it was also a cunning business maneuver for a newspaperman to sell more papers by fanning an already hot issue.)

There is no doubt, however, that Franklin was angry. The incident that sparked the piece was the persecution (as Franklin saw it) of the Reverend Samuel Hemphill (referred to as “Mr. H.” in the Dialogue). Hemphill was an Irish-born Presbyterian clergyman who emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1734—partly, it seems, because charges of unorthodoxy had gotten him into trouble in Ireland. But his past followed him to the New World. Two early sermons in New Castle prompted an official inquiry into his doctrinal purity. Acquitted by the presbytery, Hemphill left New Castle and moved to Philadelphia, where he became assistant minister to the congregation Franklin earlier had left in disgust. While serving in this capacity, so Franklin tells us, Hemphill regularly preached sermons that had “little of the dogmatical kind, but inculcated strongly the Practice of Virtue, or what in the religious Stile are called Good Works.” The officiating minister, one Jebediah Andrews, as well as some members of the congregation, found these sermons theologically unacceptable.

On 7 April 1735, Hemphill once again was charged with unorthodoxy, and a synodical commission was called to investigate.

Franklin was outraged by what he took to be the small-minded sectarianism of the Presbyterian establishment and joined the controversy by defending Hemphill in the Dialogue. But the work is much more than merely a brief for Hemphill. It is significant as a deistic indictment of one of the central tenets of Calvinism—justification by faith.

In the Dialogue, Franklin criticizes the precept that faith (as opposed to good works) is the only road to salvation by turning the Christian establishment’s primary weapon—scriptural authority—against it. He argues that a careful study of the Gospels reveals that the main thrust of Jesus’ teaching is moral in tenor, that Jesus emphatically tells his followers that good works and not faith in his divinity are the key to the Kingdom of Heaven, and that virtue is “a doctrine exactly agreeable to Christianity.” Franklin rhetorically concedes that faith is a necessary condition for virtuous behavior, but he defines “faith” as trust in the purity of Jesus’ moral teaching and example, not in his godhead.
Moreover, Franklin castigates the Calvinist establishment for its assumption that its basic doctrines are infallible. Protestantism, he argues, correctly criticizes the Roman church for its endorsement of papal inerrancy. How then, he asks, "can we modestly claim Infallibility for our selves or our Synods in our way of Interpreting?" Franklin's point is that humans are by nature fallible in their reasoning and that consequently a rigid fidelity to written-in-stone doctrine is always suspect. As he characteristically observes, "Peace, Unity and Virtue in any Church are more to be regarded than Orthodoxy." These two themes—the importance of virtue and the soundness of keeping an open mind about religious matters—reappear time and again throughout Franklin's writings.

Franklin's defense of Hemphill was unsuccessful—it may, in fact, have exacerbated Hemphill's already precarious situation. At any rate, Hemphill was unanimously censored by the members of the Commission of the Synod on 27 April 1735. Moreover, the commission suspended him from the ministry for doctrines "Unsound and Dangerous, contrary to the sacred Scriptures and our excellent Confession and Catechisms." Franklin followed up in the 17 July issue of the Gazette with a harsh criticism of the commission's decision. Again, however, his efforts were to no avail. The verdict against Hemphill remained, and the unhappy minister, as Franklin recalls in his Autobiography, "left us in search elsewhere of better fortune."

... S. Good Morrow! I am glad to find you well and abroad; for not having seen you at Meeting lately, I concluded you were indispos'd.

T. Tis true I have not been much at Meeting lately, but that was not occasion'd by any Indisposition. In short, I stay at home, or else go to Church, because I do not like Mr. H. Your new-fangled Preacher.

S. I am sorry we should differ in Opinion upon any Account; but let us reason the Point calmly; what Offense does Mr. H. give you?

T. Tis his Preaching disturbs me: He talks of nothing but the Duties of Morality: I do not love to hear so much of Morality: I am sure it will carry no Man to Heaven, and I do not think it fit to be preached in a Christian Congregation.

S. I suppose you think no Doctrine fit to be preached in a Christian congregation, but such as Christ and his Apostles used to preach.

T. To be sure I think so.

S. I do not conceive then how you can dislike the Preaching of Morality, when you consider, that Morality made the principal Part of their Preaching as well as of Mr. H's. What is Christ's Sermon on the Mount but an excellent moral Discourse, towards the end of which, (as foreseeing that People might in time come to depend more upon their Faith in him, than upon Good Works, for their Salvation) he tells the Hearers plainly, that their saying to him, Lord,
Lord, (that is, professing themselves his Disciples or Christians) should give them no Title to Salvation, but their Doing the Will of his Father; and that tho' they have prophesied in his Name, yet he will declare to them, as Neglecters of Morality, that he never knew them.

T. But what do you understand by that Expression of Christ's, Doing the Will of my Father?

S. I understand it to be the Will of God, that we should live virtuous, upright, and good-doing Lives; as the Prophet understood it, when he said, What doth the Lord require of thee, O Man, but to do justly, love Mercy, and walk humbly with the Lord thy God.

T. But is not Faith recommended in the New Testament as well as Morality?

S. Tis true, it is. Faith is recommended as a Means of producing Morality: Our Saviour was a Teacher of Morality or Virtue, and they that were deficient and desired to be taught, ought first to believe in him as an able and faithful Teacher. Thus Faith would be a Means of producing Morality, and Morality of Salvation. But that from such Faith alone Salvation may be expected, appears to me to be neither a Christian Doctrine nor a reasonable one. And I should as soon expect, that my bare Believing Mr. Grew* to be an excellent Teacher of the Mathematicks, would make me a Mathematician, as that Believing in Christ would of it self make a Man a Christian.

T. Perhaps you may think, that tho' Faith alone cannot save a Man, Morality or Virtue alone, may.

S. Morality or Virtue is the End, Faith only a Means to obtain that end: And if the End be obtained, it is no matter by what Means. What think you of these Sayings of Christ, when he was reproached for conversing chiefly with gross Sinners, The whole, says he, need not a Physician, but they that are sick; and, I come not to call the Righteous, but Sinners, to Repentance. Does not this imply, that there were good Men, who, without Faith in him, were in a State of Salvation? And moreover, did he not say of Nathanael, while he was yet an Unbeliever in him, and thought no Good could possibly come out of Nazareth, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no Guile! that is, behold a virtuous upright Man. Faith in Christ, however, may be and is of great Use to produce a good Life, but that it can conduce nothing towards Salvation where it does not conduce to Virtue, is, I suppose, plain from the Instance of the Devils, who are far from being Infidels, they believe, says the Scripture, and tremble. There were some indeed, even in the Apostles' Days, that set a great Value upon Faith, distinct from Good Works, they merely idolized it, and

*Ed.: The reference is to Theophilus Grew, a popular tutor of mathematics in the Philadelphia area. Grew was appointed professor of mathematics in the Academy and College of Philadelphia in 1751, a position he held until his death eight years later.
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thought that a Man ever so righteous could not be saved without it: But one of the Apostles, to show his Dislike of such Notions, tells them, that not only those heinous Sins of Theft, Murder, and Blasphemy, but even Idleness, or the Neglect of a Man's Business, was more pernicious than mere harmless Infidelity, He that neglects to provide for them of his own House, says he, is worse than an Infidel. St. James, in his second Chapter, is very zealous against these Cryers-up of Faith, and maintains that Faith without Virtue is useless, Wilt thou know, O vain Man, says he, that Faith without Works is dead; and, shew me your Faith without your Works, and I will shew you mine by my Works. Our Saviour, when describing the Last Judgment, and declaring what shall give Admission into Bliss, or exclude from it, says nothing of Faith but what he says against it, that is, that those who cry Lord, Lord, and profess to have believed in his Name, have no Favour to expect on that Account; but declares that 'tis the Practice, or the omitting the Practice of the Duties of Morality, Feeding the Hungry, cloathing the Naked, visiting the Sick, &c. in short, 'tis the Doing or not Doing all the Good that lies in our Power, that will render us the Heirs of Happiness or Misery.

T. But if Faith is of great Use to produce a good Life, why does not Mr. H. preach up Faith as well as Morality?

S. Perhaps it may [be] this, that as the good Physician suits his Physick to the Disease he finds in the Patient, so Mr. H. may possibly think, that though Faith in Christ be properly first preach'd to Heathens and such as are ignorant of the Gospel, yet since he knows that we have been baptized in the Name of Christ, and educated in his Religion, and call'd after his Name, it may not be so immediately necessary to preach Faith to us who abound in it, as Morality in which we are evidently deficient: For our late Want of Charity to each other, our Heart-burnings and Bickerings are notorious. St. James says, Where Envying and Strife is, there is Confusion and every evil Work: and where Confusion and every evil Work is, Morality and Good-will to Men, can, I think, be no unsuitable Doctrine. But surely Morality can do us no harm. Upon a Supposition that we all have Faith in Christ already, as I think we have, where can be the Damage of being exhorted to Good Works? Is Virtue Heresy; and Universal Benevolence False Doctrine, that any of us should keep away from Meeting because it is preached there?

T. Well, I do not like it, and I hope we shall not long be troubled with it. A Commission of the Synod will sit in a short Time, and try this Sort of Preaching.

S. I am glad to hear that the Synod are to take it into Consideration. There are Men of unquestionable Good Sense as well as Piety among them, and I doubt not but they will, by their Decision, deliver our Profession from the satirical Reflection, which a few uneasy People of our Congregation have of late given Occasion for, to wit, That the Presbyterians are going to persecute,
silence and condemn a good Preacher, for exhorting them to be honest and charitable to one another and the rest of Mankind.

T. If Mr. H. is a Presbyterian Teacher, he ought to preach as Presbyterians used to preach; or else he may justly be condemn’d and silenc’d by our Church Authority. We ought to abide by the Westminster Confession of Faith; and he that does not, ought not to preach in our Meetings.

S. The Apostasy of the Church from the primitive Simplicity of the Gospel, came on by Degrees; and do you think that the Reformation was of a sudden perfect, and that the first Reformers knew at once all that was right or wrong in Religion? Did not Luther at first preach only against selling of Pardons, allowing all the other Practices of the Romish Church for good? He afterwards went further, and Calvin, some think, yet further. The Church of England made a Stop, and fix’d her Faith and Doctrine by 39 Articles; with which the Presbyterians not satisfied, went yet farther; but being too self-confident to think, that as their Fathers were mistaken in some Things, they also might be in some others; and fancying themselves infallible in their Interpretations, they also try’d themselves down by the Westminster Confession. But has not a Synod that meets in King George the Second’s Reign, as much Right to interpret Scripture, as one that met in Oliver’s Time? And if any Doctrine then maintain’d is, or shall hereafter be found not altogether orthodox, why must we be for ever confin’d to that, or to any, Confession?

T. But if the Majority of the Synod be against any Innovation, they may justly hinder the Innovator from Preaching.

S. That is as much as to say, if the Majority of the Preachers be in the wrong, they may justly hinder any Man from setting the People right; for a Majority may be in the wrong as well as the Minority, and frequently are. In the beginning of the Reformation, the Majority was vastly against the Reformers, and continues so to this Day; and, if, according to your Opinion, they had a Right to silence the Minority, I am sure the Minority ought to have been silent. But tell me, if the Presbyterians in this Country, being charitably inclin’d, should send a Missionary into Turkey, to propagate the Gospel, would it not be unreasonable in the Turks to prohibit his Preaching?

T. It would, to be sure, because he comes to them for their good.

S. And if the Turks, believing us in the wrong, as we think them, should out of the same charitable Disposition, send a Missionary to preach Mahometanism to us, ought we not in the same manner to give him free Liberty of preaching his Doctrine?

T. It may be so; but what would you infer from that?

S. I would only infer, that if it would be thought reasonable to suffer a Turk to preach among us a Doctrine diametrically opposite to Christianity, it cannot be reasonable to silence one of our own Preachers, for preaching a Doctrine exactly agreeable to Christianity, only because he does not perhaps zealously
propagate all the Doctrines of an old Confession. And upon the whole, though the Majority of the Synod should not in all respects approve of Mr. H's Doctrine, I do not however think they will find it proper to condemn him. We have justly deny'd the Infallibility of the Pope and his Councils and Synods in their Interpretations of Scripture, and can we modestly claim Infallibility for our selves or our Synods in our way of Interpreting? Peace, Unity and Virtue in any Church are more to be regarded than Orthodoxy. In the present weak State of human Nature, surrounded as we are on all sides with Ignorance and Error, it little becomes poor fallible Man to be positive and dogmatical in his Opinions. No Point of Faith is so plain, as that Morality is our Duty, for all Sides agree in that. A virtuous Heretick shall be saved before a wicked Christian: for there is no such Thing as voluntary Error. Therefore, since 'tis an Uncertainty till we get to Heaven what true Orthodoxy in all points is, and since our Congregation is rather too small to be divided, I hope this Misunderstanding will soon be got over, and that we shall as heretofore unite again in mutual Christian Charity.

T. I wish we may. I'll consider of what you've said, and wish you well.

S. Farewell.

To Josiah and Abiah Franklin (13 April 1738)

This letter, written by Franklin to his parents, is probably in response to rumors of his religious unorthodoxy. Compare this version with the one immediately following it—a draft of a letter addressed by Franklin to his father only, which appears to have never been sent.

Honour'd Father and Mother

I have your Favour of the 21st of March in which you both seem concern'd lest I have imbib'd some erroneous Opinions. Doubtless I have my Share, and when the natural Weakness and Imperfection of Human Understanding is considered, with the unavoidable Influences of Education, Custom, Books and Company, upon our Ways of thinking, I imagine a Man must have a good deal of Vanity who believes, and a good deal of Boldness who affirms, that all the Doctrines he holds, are true; and all he rejects, are false. And perhaps the same may be justly said of every Sect, Church and Society of men when they assume to themselves that Infallibility which they deny to the Popes and Councils. I think Opinions should be judg'd of by their Influences and Effects; and if a Man holds none that tend to make him less Virtuous or more vicious, it may be concluded he holds none that are dangerous; which I hope is the Case with me. I am sorry you should have any Uneasiness on my Account, and if it were a thing possible for one to alter his Opinions in order to please others, I know none whom I ought more willingly to oblige in that respect than your selves:
But since it is no more in a Man's Power to think than to look like another, methinks all that should be expected from me is to keep my Mind open to Conviction, to hear patiently and examine attentively whatever is offered me for that end; and if after all I continue in the same Errors, I believe your usual Charity will induce you rather to pity and excuse than blame me. In the mean time your Care and Concern for me is what I am very thankful for.

As to the Freemasons, unless she will believe me when I assure her that they are in general a very harmless sort of People; and have no principles or Practices that are inconsistent with Religion or good Manners, I know no Way of giving my Mother a better Opinion of them than she seems to have at present, (since it is not allow'd that Women should be admitted into that secret Society). She has, I must confess, on that Account, some reason to be displeas'd with it; but for any thing else, I must entreat her to suspend her Judgment till she is better inform'd, and in the mean time exercise her Charity.

My Mother grieves that one of her Sons is an Arian, another an Arminian. What an Arminian or an Arian is, I cannot say that I very well know; the Truth is, I make such Distinctions very little my Study; I think vital Religion has always suffer'd, when Orthodoxy is more regarded than Virtue. And the Scripture assures me, that at the last Day, we shall not be examin'd what we thought, but what we did; and our Recommendation will not be that we said Lord, Lord, but that we did good to our Fellow Creatures. . . .

Draft of a Letter to His Father (13 April 1738[?])
I have yours of the 21st March, with another from my Mother, in which you both seem concern'd for my Orthodoxy. God only knows whether all the Doctrines I hold for true, be so or not. For my part, I must confess, I believe they are not, but I am not able to distinguish the good from the bad. And Knowing my self, as I do, to be a weak ignorant Creature, full of natural Imperfections, subject to be frequently misled by my own Reasonings, or the wrong Arguments of others, to the Influence of Education, of Custom, of Company, and the Books I read, It would be great Vanity in me to imagine that I have been so happy, as out of an infinite Number of Opinions of which a few only can be true, to select those only for my own Use. No, I am doubtless in Error as well as my Neighbours, and methinks a Man can not say, All the Doctrines that I believe, are true; and all that I reject, are false, without arrogantly claiming to himself that Infallibility which he denies to the Pope, with the greatest Indignation.

From such Considerations as these it follows, that I ought never to be angry with any one for differing in Judgment from me. For how know I but the Point in dispute between us, is one of those Errors that I have embrac'd as Truth. If I am in the Wrong, I should not be displeas'd that another is in the
right. If I am in the Right, 'tis my Happiness; and I should rather pity than blame him who is unfortunately in the wrong.

The Lord's Prayer (1768[?])

Few other pieces so clearly reflect Franklin's basic conviction that religious belief should be an expression of rational inquiry conducive to utility than this sketch of a reformulated Lord's Prayer. In it, he drops what he considers to be archaic forms of address held onto merely for tradition's sake, substituting expressions he considers more representative of rational religion. As with so many of his theological musings, this selection illustrates his concern that belief in the deity be promotive of virtue.

**Old Version**

1. Our Father which art in Heaven,
2. Hallowed be thy Name.
3. Thy Kingdom come.
4. Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.
5. Give us this Day our daily Bread.
6. Forgive us our Debts as we forgive our Debtors.
7. And lead us not into Temptation, but deliver us from Evil.

**New Version by B. F.**

1. Heavenly Father,
2. May all revere thec,
3. And become thy dutiful Children and faithful Subjects.
4. May thy Laws be obeyed on Earth as perfectly as they are in Heaven.
5. Provide for us this Day as thou hast hitherto daily done.
6. Forgive us our Trespasses and enable us likewise to forgive those that offend us.
7. Keep us out of Temptation, and deliver us from Evil.

**Reasons for the Change of Expression**

Old Version. *Our Father which art in Heaven.*

New V.—*Heavenly Father,* is more concise, equally expressive, and better modern English.—

Old V.—*Hallowed be thy Name.* This seems to relate to an Observance among the Jews not to pronounce the proper or peculiar Name of God, they deeming it a Profanation so to do. We have in our Language no proper Name for God; the Word *God* being a common or general Name, expressing all chief Objects of Worship, true or false. The Word *hallowed* is almost
obsolete. People now have but an imperfect Conception of the Meaning of the Petition. It is therefore proposed to change the expression into

New V.—May all revere thee.

Old V.—Thy Kingdom come. This Petition seems suited to the then Condition of the Jewish Nation. Originally their State was a Theocracy. God was their King. Dissatisfied with that kind of Government, they desired a visible earthly King in the same manner of the Nations around them. They had such Kings accordingly; but their Offerings were due to God on many Occasions by the Jewish Law, which when People could not pay, or had forgotten as Debtors are apt to do, it was proper to pray that those Debts might be forgiven. Our Liturgy uses neither the Debtors of Matthew, nor the indebted of Luke, but instead of them speaks of those that trespass against us. Perhaps the Considering it as a Christian Duty to forgive Debtors, was by the Compilers thought an inconvenient Idea in a trading Nation.—There seems however something presumptuous in this Mode of Expression, which has the Air of proposing ourselves as an Example of Goodness fit for God to imitate. We hope you will at least be as good as we are; you see we forgive one another, and therefore we pray that you would forgive us. Some have considered it in another sense, Forgive us as we forgive others; i.e. If we do not forgive others we pray that thou wouldst not forgive us. But this being a kind of conditional Imprecation against ourselves, seems improper in such a Prayer; and therefore it may be better to say humbly & modestly

New V.—Forgive us our Trespasses, and enable us likewise to forgive those that offend us. This instead of assuming that we have already in & of ourselves the Grace of Forgiveness, acknowledges our Dependence on God, the Fountain of Mercy for any Share we may have in it, praying that he would communicate of it to us.—

Old V.—And lead us not into Temptation. The Jews had a Notion, that God sometimes tempted, or directed or permitted the Tempting of People. Thus it was said he tempted Pharaoh; directed Satan to tempt Job; and a false Prophet to tempt Ahab, &c. Under this Persuasion it was natural for them to pray that he would not put them to such severe Trials. We now suppose that Temptation, so far as it is supernatural, comes from the Devil only, and this Petition continued conveys a Suspicion which in our present Conception seems unworthy of God, therefore might be altered to

New V.—Keep us out of Temptation. Happiness was not increas’d by the Change, and they had reason to wish and pray for a Return of the Theocracy, or Government of God. Christians in these Times have other Ideas when they speak of the Kingdom of God, such as are perhaps more adequately express’d by

New V.—And become thy Dutiful Children & faithful Subjects.
Old V.—Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

New V.—May thy Laws be obeyed on Earth as perfectly as they are in Heaven.

Old V.—Give us this Day our daily Bread. Give us what is ours, seems to put us in a Claim of Right, and to contain too little of the grateful Acknowledgment and Sense of Dependance that becomes Creatures who live on the daily Bounty of their Creator. Therefore it is changed to

New V.—Provide for us this Day, as thou hast hitherto daily done.

Old V.—Forgive us our Debts as we forgive our Debtors. Matthew.

Forgive us our Sins, for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. Luke.

Selections from Franklin's Autobiography (1771, 1784, 1788)

Few memoirs have achieved the lasting appeal of Franklin's Autobiography. His recollections provide an urbane glimpse into a remarkable personality—although it is an incomplete glimpse, since the Autobiography only covers the first five decades of Franklin's long life. More significantly, his reminiscences shed light upon the character and temperament of an entire era. The Autobiography is an exercise in social, intellectual, and political history. It is also a document that attests to Franklin's lifelong fidelity to sectarian tolerance, virtuous behavior, and deistic religious sensibilities.

The following excerpts from the Autobiography discuss Franklin's early retreat from the dogmatic materialism defended in his Dissertation; his conviction that rational religion, unadorned with supernaturalist tenets, is most worthy of both the deity and reflective humans; his disgust with doctrinal bigotry; his famous "program of moral perfection," by which he sought to test his Aristotelian belief that virtue is a matter of habit; his memories and appraisal of the Reverend George Whitefield, one of the central figures in the Great Awakening revivalist movement, which swept through the colonies between 1739 and 1742; and his insistence that no particular religious sect has a monopoly on the divine but rather that all, to one degree or another, contain elements of truth.

Franklin wrote his memoirs on three separate occasions. Selection (1) here is taken from the portion he wrote in 1771; selection (2) from that of 1784; and the final three selections from the manuscript of 1788.

(1)

My parents had early given me religious impressions, and brought me through my childhood piously in the Dissenting way. But I was scarce fifteen, when, after doubting by turns of several points, as I found them disputed in the different books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself. Some books against Deism fell into my hands; they were said to be the substance of sermons preached at Boyle's Lectures. It happened that they wrought an effect on me
quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the Deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough Deist. . . . [But] I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful. My London pamphlet, [Franklin's 1725 Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain] which . . . from the attributes of God, his infinite wisdom, goodness and power, concluded that nothing could possibly be wrong in the world, and that vice and virtue were empty distinctions, no such things existing, appeared now not so clever a performance as I once thought it; and I doubted whether some error had not insinuated itself unperceived into my argument, so as to infect all that followed, as is common in metaphysical reasoning.

I grew convinced that truth, sincerity and integrity in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life; and I formed written resolutions, which still remain in my journal book, to practice them ever while I lived. Revelation had indeed no weight with me, as such; but I entertained an opinion that, though certain actions might not be bad because they were forbidden by it, or good because it commanded them, yet probably these actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial to us, in their own natures, all the circumstances of things considered. And this persuasion, with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian angel, or accidental favorable circumstances and situations, or all together, preserved me, through this dangerous time of youth, and the hazardous situations I was sometimes in among strangers, remote from the eye and advice of my father, without any willful gross immorality or injustice, that might have been expected from my want of religion. I say willful, because the instances I have mentioned had something of necessity in them, from my youth, inexperience, and the knavery of others. I had therefore a tolerable character to begin the world with; I valued it properly, and determined to preserve it.

I had been religiously educated as a Presbyterian; and though some of the dogmas of that persuasion, such as the eternal decrees of God, election, reprobation, etc., appeared to me unintelligible, others doubtful, and I early absented myself from the public assemblies of the sect, Sunday being my studying day, I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and governed it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteemed the essentials of every religion; and, being found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected
them all, though with different degrees of respect, as I found them more or less mixed with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, served principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another. This respect to all, with an opinion that the worst had some good effects, induced me to avoid all discourse that might tend to lessen the good opinion another might have of his own religion; and as our province increased in people, and new places of worship were continually wanted, and generally erected by voluntary contribution, my mite for such purpose, whatever might be the sect, was never refused.

Though I seldom attended any public worship, I had still an opinion of propriety, and of its utility when rightly conducted, and I regularly paid my annual subscription for the support of the only Presbyterian minister* or meeting we had in Philadelphia. He used to visit me sometimes as a friend, and admonish me to attend his administrations, and I was now and then prevailed on to do so, once for five Sundays successively. Had he been in my opinion a good preacher, perhaps I might have continued, notwithstanding the occasion I had for the Sunday's leisure in my course of study; but his discourses were chiefly either polemic arguments, or explications of the peculiar doctrines of our sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting, and unedifying, since not a single moral principle was inculcated or enforced, their aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good citizens.

At length he took for his text that verse of the fourth chapter of Philippians, Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or of good report, if there be any virtue, or any praise, think on these things. And I imagined, in a sermon on such a text, we could not miss of having some morality. But he confined himself to five points only, as meant by the apostle, viz.: 1. Keeping holy the Sabbath day. 2. Being diligent in reading the holy Scriptures. 3. Attending duly the public worship. 4. Partaking of the Sacrament. 5. Paying a due respect to God's ministers. These might be all good things; but, as they were not the kind of good things that I expected from that text, I despaired of ever meeting with them from any other, was disgusted, and attended his preaching no more. I had some years before composed a little Liturgy, or form of prayer, for my own private use, entitled, Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion. I returned to the use of this, and went no more to the public assemblies. My conduct might be blameable, but I leave it, without attempting further to excuse it; my present purpose being to relate facts, and not to make apologies for them.

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

*Ed.: The Presbyterian minister referred to is Jebediah Andrews, who was also involved in the Hemphill affair; see introduction to Dialogue between Two Presbyterians.
I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue 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 names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. TEMPERANCE.—Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. SILENCE.—Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. ORDER.—Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
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.
12. CHASTITY.—Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another’s peace or reputation.
13. HUMILITY.—Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

My intention being to acquire the habit of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone through the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arranged them with that view, as they stand above. Temperance first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits, and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, Silence would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave Silence the second place. This and the next, Order, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. Resolution, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues. Frugality and Industry freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of Sincerity and Justice, etc., etc.

It will be remarked that, though my scheme was not wholly without religion, there was in it no mark of any of the distinguishing tenets of any particular sect. I had purposely avoided them; for, being fully persuaded of the utility and excellency of my method, and that it might be serviceable to people in all religions, and intending some time or other to publish it, I would not have any thing in it that should prejudice any one, of any sect, against it. I purposed writing a little comment on each virtue, in which I would have shown the advantages of possessing it, and the mischiefs attending its opposite vice; and I should have called my book THE ART OF VIRTUE, because it would have shown the means and manner of obtaining virtue, which would have distinguished it from the mere exhortation to be good, that does not instruct and indicate the means, but is like the apostle’s man of verbal charity, who only without showing to the naked and hungry how or where they might get clothes or victuals, exhorted them to be fed and clothed.—James ii, 15, 16.

But it so happened that my intention of writing and publishing this com-
ment was never fulfilled. I did, indeed, from time to time, put down short hints of the sentiments, reasonings, etc., to be made use of in it, some of which I have still by me; but the necessary close attention to private business in the earlier part of my life, and my public business since, have occasioned my postponing it; for, it being connected in my mind with a great and extensive project, that required the whole man to execute, and which an unforeseen succession of employments prevented my attending to, it has hitherto remained unfinished.

In this piece it was my design to explain and enforce this doctrine, that vicious actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the nature of man alone considered; that it was therefore, every one’s interest to be virtuous who wished to be happy even in this world; and I should, from this circumstance (there being always in the world a number of rich merchants, nobility, states, and princes, who have need of honest instruments for the management of their affairs, and such being so rare), have endeavored to convince young persons that no qualities were so likely to make a poor man’s fortune as those of probity and integrity.

I put down, from time to time, on pieces of paper, such thoughts as occurred to me. . . . Most of these are lost; but I find one purporting to be the substance of an intended creed, containing, as I thought, the essentials of every known religion, and being free of every thing that might shock the professors of any religion. It is expressed in these words, viz.:

“That there is one God, who made all things.
“That he governs the world by his providence.
“That he ought to be worshiped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving.
“But that the most acceptable service to God is doing good to man.
“That the soul is immortal.
“And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice, either here or hereafter.”

In 1739 arrived among us from Ireland the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, who had made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches; but the clergy, taking a dislike to him, soon refused him their pulpits, and he was obliged to preach in the fields. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was a matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admired and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them, by assuring them they were naturally half beasts and half devils. It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhab-
I Believe in One God, Creator of the Universe

itants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all
the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town
in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.

And it being found inconvenient to assemble in the open air, subject to its
inclemencies, the building of a house to meet in was no sooner proposed, and
persons appointed to receive contributions, but sufficient sums were soon re­
cieved to procure the ground and erect the building, which was one hundred
feet long and seventy broad, about the size of Westminster Hall; and the work
was carried on with such spirit as to be finished in a much shorter time than
could have been expected. Both house and ground were vested in trustees,
expressly for the use of any preacher of any religious persuasion who might
desire to say something to the people at Philadelphia; the design in building
not being to accommodate any particular sect, but the inhabitants in general;
so that even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach
Mohammedanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his service.

Mr. Whitefield, on leaving us, went preaching all the way through the
colonies to Georgia. The settlement of that province had lately been begun,
but, instead of being made with hardy, industrious husbandmen, accustomed
to labor, the only people fit for such an enterprise, it was with families of broken
shop-keepers and other insolvent debtors, many of indolent and idle habits,
taken out of the jails, who, being set down in the woods, unqualified for
clearing land, and unable to endure the hardships of a new settlement, perished
in numbers, leaving many helpless children unprovided for. The sight of their
miserable situation inspired the benevolent heart of Mr. Whitefield with the
idea of building an Orphan House there, in which they might be supported
and educated. Returning northward, he preached up this charity, and made
large collections, for his eloquence had a wonderful power over the hearts and
purses of his hearers, of which I myself was an instance.

I did not disapprove of the design, but, as Georgia was then destitute of
materials and workmen, and it was proposed to send them from Philadelphia
at a great expense, I thought it would have been better to have built the house
there, and brought the children to it. This I advised; but he was resolute in his
first project, rejected my counsel, and I therefore refused to contribute. I hap­
dened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I per­
ceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should
get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or
four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften,
and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me
ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so
admirably, that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and
all. At this sermon there was also one of our club, who being of my sentiments
respecting the building in Georgia, and suspecting a collection might be in-
tended, had, by precaution, emptied his pockets before he came from home. Towards the conclusion of the discourse, however, he felt a strong desire to give, and applied to a neighbor, who stood near him, to borrow some money for the purpose. The application was unfortunately made to perhaps the only man in the company who had the firmness not to be affected by the preacher. His answer was, At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely; but not now, for thee seems to be out of thy right senses. . . .

The following instance will show something of the terms on which we stood. Upon one of his [Whitefield's] arrivals from England at Boston, he wrote to me that he should come soon to Philadelphia, but knew not where he could lodge when there, as he understood his old friend, and host, Mr. Benezet [probably Anthony Benezet, a Quaker educator and reformer], was removed to Germantown. My answer was, “You know my house; if you can make shift with its scanty accommodations, you will be most heartily welcome.” He replied, that if I made that kind offer for Christ’s sake, I should not miss of a reward. And I returned, “Don’t let me be mistaken; it was not for Christ’s sake, but for your sake.” One of our common acquaintance jocosely remarked, that, knowing it to be the custom of the saints, when they received any favour, to shift the burden of the obligation from off their own shoulders, and place it in heaven, I had contrived to fix it on earth. . . .

[The] embarrassments that the Quakers suffered from having established and published 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, reminds me of what I think a more prudent conduct in another sect among us, that of the Dunkers. I was acquainted with one of its founders, Michael Welfare, soon after it appeared. He complained to me that they were grievously calumniated by the zealots of other persuasions, and charged with abominable principles and practices to which they were utter strangers. I told him this had always been the case with new sects and that to put a stop to such abuse, I imagined it might be well to publish the articles of their belief and the rules of their discipline. He said that it had been proposed among them, but not agreed to for this reason: “When we were first drawn together as a society,” says he, “it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so far as to see that some doctrines which we once esteemed truths were errors, and that others which we had esteemed errors were real truths. From time to time he has been pleased to afford us further light, and our principles have been improving and our errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we are arrived at the end of this progression, and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge; and we fear that if we should once print our confession of faith, we
should feel ourselves as if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive further improvement, and our successors still more so, as conceiving what their elders and founders had done to be something sacred, never to be departed from." This modesty in a sect is perhaps a singular instance in the history of mankind, every other sect supposing itself in possession of all truth, and that those who differ are so far in the wrong—like a man travelling in foggy weather: Those at some distance before him on the road he sees wrapped up in the fog, as well as those behind him, and also the people in the fields on each side; but near him all appears clear, tho' in truth he is as much in the fog as any of them. To avoid this kind of embarrassment, the Quakers have of late years been gradually declining the public service in the Assembly and in the magistracy, choosing rather to quit their power than their principle.

The Levee (1779[?])

On its surface, this short piece conveys a political rather than a religious message. Probably written in 1779, it is a rather transparent allegorical condemnation of the monarchy of George III. Just as the biblical Job was unjustly brought low by a divine monarch influenced by the rumor-mongering of a courtier (Satan), so the colonies have been unfairly treated by an earthly monarch's misguided harkening to his "malicious courtiers." The political lesson is obvious: "Trust not a single person with the government of your state." Absolute power is capable of corrupting even a celestial ruler.

But the very fact that Franklin couches his allegory in biblical terms reflects his deistic dissatisfaction with Christian dogma and scriptural authority. In Franklin's interpretation of the Book of Job, Satan is not the only villain. God also emerges with dirty hands, acting as he does, on Satan's prompting, in a manner that Franklin obviously sees as condemnable. One of the motifs in American deism, defended by moderates and militants alike, was the claim that it was unworthy of the deity to perform actions that would be unethical if done by mortals. Scriptural passages (such as those about Job's trials) that suggested God occasionally acts arbitrarily or unjustly supported the deistic contention that the Christian notion of God was incorrect and even blasphemous. In writing The Levee, then, Franklin may have had more in mind than simply blasting political monarchy. He may also have been subtly taking a stab at a concept of God he considered to be irrational and unconducive to moral rectitude.

In the first chapter of Job we have an account of a transaction said to have arisen in the court, or at the levée, of the best of all possible princes, or of governments by a single person, viz. that of God himself.

At this levée, in which the sons of God were assembled, Satan also appeared.
It is probable the writer of that ancient book took his idea of this levee from those of the eastern monarchs of the age he lived in.

It is to this day usual at the levees of princes, to have persons assembled who are enemies to each other, who seek to obtain favor by whispering calumny and detraction, and thereby ruining those that distinguish themselves by their virtue and merit. And kings frequently ask a familiar question or two, of every one in the circle, merely to show their benignity. These circumstances are particularly exemplified in this relation.

If a modern king, for instance, finds a person in the circle who has not lately been there, he naturally asks him how he has passed his time since he last had the pleasure of seeing him? the gentleman perhaps replies that he has been in the country to view his estates, and visit some friends. Thus Satan being asked whence he cometh? answers, “From going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it.” And being further asked, whether he had considered the uprightness and fidelity of the prince’s servant Job, he immediately displays all the malignance of the designing courtier, by answering with another question: “Doth Job serve God for naught? Hast thou not given him immense wealth, and protected him in the possession of it? Deprive him of that, and he will curse thee to thy face.” In modern phrase, Take away his places and his pensions, and your Majesty will soon find him in the opposition.

This whisper against Job had its effect. He was delivered into the power of his adversary, who deprived him of his fortune, destroyed his family, and completely ruined him.

The book of Job is called by divines a sacred poem, and, with the rest of the Holy Scriptures, is understood to be written for our instruction.

What then is the instruction to be gathered from this supposed transaction?

Trust not a single person with the government of your state. For if the Deity himself, being the monarch may for a time give way to calumny, and suffer it to operate the destruction of the best of subjects; what mischief may you not expect from such power in a mere man, though the best of men, from whom the truth is often industriously hidden, and to whom falsehood is often presented in its place, by artful, interested, and malicious courtiers?

And be cautious in trusting him even with limited powers, lest sooner or later he sap and destroy those limits, and render himself absolute.

For by the disposal of places, he attaches to himself all the placeholders, with their numerous connexions, and also all the expecters and hopers of places, which will form a strong party in promoting his views. By various political engagements for the interest of neighbouring states or princes, he procures their aid in establishing his own personal power. So that, through the hopes of emolument in one part of his subjects, and the fear of his resentment in the other, all opposition falls before him.
American deism was a child of the Enlightenment and, like its progenitor, was an ardent believer in the inevitable progress of science and the ultimate perfection of humans and societies. Reason, as expressed through the natural sciences, would eradicate the vestiges of ecclesial superstition, fear, and bigotry, thereby liberating humanity from the traditional impediments to progress. Moral as well as technical improvement, the conquest of passions as well as nature, were certainties.

Franklin was probably more enamored of the promise of the physical sciences than any other American deist (with the possible exception of Jefferson), and in this letter to Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), the chemist and Unitarian, he asserts his faith in the inevitable victory of Reason. His reflections not only illustrate his deistic confidence in the ability of reason and science to improve the human condition but also strikingly anticipate twentieth-century scientific achievements.

Dear Sir,

Your kind Letter of September 27 came to hand but very lately, the Bearer having stayed long in Holland. I always rejoice to hear of your being still employ’d in experimental Researches into Nature, and of the Success you meet with. The rapid Progress true Science now makes, occasions my regretting sometimes that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the Height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the Power of Man over Matter. We may perhaps learn to deprive large Masses of their Gravity, and give them absolute Levity, for the sake of easy Transport. Agriculture may diminish its Labour and double its Produce; all Diseases may by sure means be prevented or cured, not excepting even that of Old Age, and our Lives lengthened at pleasure even beyond the antediluvian Standard. O that moral Science were in as fair a way of Improvement, that Men would cease to be Wolves to one another, and that human Beings would at length learn what they now improperly call Humanity! . . .

Franklin the deist was not cut from the same cloth as Paine, Palmer, or even Jefferson. Except for one or two exceptions (such as his Dialogue between Two Presbyterians), he studiously avoided publishing potentially offensive statements of his religious sentiment.

There are probably several reasons for his discretion. First, he seemed temperamentally unsuited for theological shouting matches; as he tells us in his Autobiography, he considered one of his life’s errata to have been his youthful indulgence in “disputatious” arguments over religious matters. Second, he appears to have taken seriously his own ethical defenses of religious toleration and was willing to coexist
peacefully with Christian sectarians so long as they reciprocated his live-and-let-live attitude. Third, as he makes clear in the Autobiography as well as his 1738 letter to his parents, he thought it reasonable to suspect that some of his religious views were incorrect and that the only appropriate reaction to this likelihood was a refusal to pontificate about them. Finally, it would have been characteristic of Franklin, who was a preeminently practical man, to wish to avoid the social opprobrium that often befell more vocal deists of his day. Franklin, in short, was a moderate deist, in doctrine as well as attitude.

But this letter to an unknown correspondent—possibly Tom Paine—suggests yet another explanation for Franklin's moderation: his suspicion that orthodox Christianity, even if fundamentally incorrect about the nature of the deity, might promote morality in its adherents. Franklin was preoccupied his entire life with ethics and early on had become convinced that virtue was dependent on an individual's habituation to good acts, regardless of the intentions that motivate them. Christianity, as he says in this letter, might be the catalyst for such habit formation: The "Motives of Religion" might restrain otherwise rudderless persons in the practice of virtue "till it becomes habitual, which is the great Point for its Security." To destroy that bearing is to risk opening the floodgates to moral anarchy.

To the later militant deists, such prudential caution would smack of frightened hypocrisy. But to the moderate Franklin, no doubt further mellowed by age, the willingness to sacrifice public morality for the sake of deism was socially unsound as well as ethically reprehensible.

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Dear Sir,

I have read your Manuscript with some Attention. By the Argument it contains against the Doctrines of a particular Providence, tho' you allow a general providence, you strike at the Foundation of all Religion. For without the Belief of a Providence, that takes Cognizance of, guards, and guides, and may favour particular Persons, there is no Motive to Worship a Deity, to fear its Displeasure, or to pray for its Protection. I will not enter into any Discussion of your Principles, tho' you seem to desire it. At present I shall only give you my Opinion, that, though your Reasonings are subtile, and may prevail with some Readers, you will not succeed so as to change the general Sentiments of Mankind on that Subject, and the Consequence of printing this Piece will be, a great deal of Odium drawn upon yourself, Mischief to you, and no Benefit to others. He that spits against the Wind, spits in his own Face.

But, were you to succeed, do you imagine any Good would be done by it? You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous Life, without the Assistance afforded by Religion; you having a clear perception of the Advantages of Virtue, and the Disadvantages of Vice, and possessing a Strength of Resolution...
sufficient to enable you to resist common Temptations. But think how great
a Proportion of Mankind consists of weak and ignorant Men and Women, and
of inexperience’d, and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the
Motives of Religion to restrain them in the Practice of it till it becomes habi-
tual, which is the great Point for its Security. And perhaps you are indebted
to her originally, that is, to your Religious Education, for the Habits of Virtue
upon which you now justly value yourself. You might easily display your excel-
lent Talents of reasoning upon a less hazardous subject, and thereby obtain a
Rank with our most distinguish’d Authors. For among us it is not necessary, as
among the Hottentots, that a Youth, to be receiv’d into the Company of men,
should prove his Manhood by beating his Mother.

I would advise you, therefore, not to attempt unchaining the Tyger, but to
burn this Piece before it is seen by any other Person; whereby you will save
yourself a great deal of Mortification from the Enemies it may raise against you,
and perhaps a good deal of Regret and Repentance. If men are so wicked as we
now see them with religion, what would they be if without it. I intend this
Letter itself as a Proof of my Friendship, and therefore add no Professions
to it. . . .

Motion for Prayers in the Convention

(28 June 1787)

In 1787 Franklin, rich in years and honor, was once again called on to exercise
virtue in the public interest: He was elected a Pennsylvania delegate to the Con-
stitutional Convention. After a month of heated debate that sometimes degener-
ated into full-scale bickering, Franklin had had enough. He appealed to the del-
egates’ consciences by moving that the sessions be opened with prayer.

Franklin’s motion (which was almost unanimously rejected) is itself rather
unremarkable. But when placed in context, it affirms that the old man still sub-
scribed to the views on divine providence he had defended some fifty-five years
earlier (as in On the Providence of God in the Government of the World). It
also underscores his steadfast deistic faith in the benevolence of the deity, the neces-
sity of government by human reason, and tolerance of all religious sects (as wit-
nessed by its final suggestion that clergy of all persuasions be invited to lead the
convention in prayer).

Mr. President,

The small Progress we have made, after 4 or 5 Weeks’ close Attendance and
continual Reasonings with each other, our different Sentiments on almost
every Question, several of the last producing as many Noes as Ayes, is, methinks, a
melancholy Proof of the Imperfection of the Human Understanding. We
indeed seem to feel our own want of political Wisdom, since we have been
running all about in Search of it. We have gone back to ancient History for Models of Government, and examin’d the different Forms of those Republics, which, having been originally form’d with the Seeds of their own Dissolution, now no longer exist; and we have view’d modern States all round Europe, but find none of their Constitutions suitable to our Circumstances.

In this Situation of this Assembly, groping, as it were, in the dark to find Political Truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our Understandings? In the Beginning of the Contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of Danger, we had daily Prayers in this Room for the Divine Protection. Our Prayers, Sir, were heard;—and they were graciously answered. All of us, who were engag’d in the Struggle, must have observed frequent Instances of a superintending Providence in our Favour. To that kind Providence we owe this happy Opportunity of Consulting in Peace on the Means of establishing our future national Felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? or do we imagine we no longer need its assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time; and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this Truth, that God governs in the Affairs of Men. And if a Sparrow cannot fall to the Ground without His Notice, is it probable that an Empire can rise without His Aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that "except the Lord build the House, they labour in vain that build it." I firmly believe this; and I also believe, that, without his concurring Aid, we shall succeed in this political Building no better than the Builders of Babel; we shall be divided by our little, partial, local Interests, our Projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a Reproach and a Bye-word down to future Ages. And, what is worse, Mankind may hereafter, from this unfortunate Instance, despair of establishing Government by human Wisdom, and leave it to Chance, War, and Conquest.

I therefore beg leave to move,

That henceforth Prayers, imploring the Assistance of Heaven and its Blessing on our Deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to Business; and that one or more of the Clergy of this city be requested to officiate in that Service.

To Ezra Stiles (9 March 1790)
The following letter to Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College, was written five weeks before Franklin’s death. Although an orthodox Calvinist in his later years, Stiles had gone through a long period of religious confusion, turning first to deism and then to Arminianism before his midlife “rebirth.” His own history of doubt lends a certain poignancy to his request for an account of Franklin’s religious sentiments.

In his reply to Stiles, Franklin echoes the basic deistic catechism he had endorsed
in his earlier credos of 1728, 1731, and 1784. The general themes of benevolent providence, virtue, and religious tolerance, central to Franklin's lifelong religious perspective, are reaffirmed, as is his dislike of theological speculation (or "metaphysical reasoning," as he would have said). Finally, and most interestingly, Franklin's reply contains one of his few public confessions of doubt about the divinity of Jesus—although, characteristically, he adds that if such a belief is promotive of public virtue, it serves a good purpose.

Reverend and Dear Sir,

... You desire to know something of my Religion. It is the first time I have been questioned upon it. But I cannot take your Curiosity amiss, and shall endeavour in a few Words to gratify it. Here is my Creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him is doing good to his other Children. That the soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever Sect I meet with them.

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity; tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that Belief has the good Consequence, as probably it has, of making his Doctrines more respected and better observed; especially as I do not perceive, that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the Unbelievers in his Government of the World with any peculiar Marks of his Displeasure.

I shall only add, respecting myself, that, having experienced the Goodness of that Being in conducting me prosperously thro' a long life, I have no doubt of its Continuance in the next, though without the smallest Conceit of meriting such Goodness. . . .