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CARLA MULFORD

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FRANK KELLETER

Franklin and the Enlightenment

I

Franklin and his contemporaries may never have seen themselves as members of a unified intellectual movement, but they did believe that their world was historically distinct in a number of ways. The term *reason*, contested as it was in the eighteenth century, widely served to signify this sense of distance from earlier periods. The same is true for the name, *Benjamin Franklin*, which came to stand for all sorts of things but almost always symbolized the promise or threat of a new age of human autonomy. “Had Franklin drawn lightning from the clouds [three hundred years ago],” Thomas Paine noted in *The Age of Reason* (1794), “it would have been at the hazard of expiring for it in the flames.”¹ Paine implied that in the Middle Ages, Franklin’s scientific discoveries – his disenchantment of nature – would have challenged the authority of the Catholic church, and he might have been burned at the stake. Yet in his own enlightened times, Franklin was seen as a representative man of his age, and his discoveries and inventions symbolized social and political revolutions of the highest magnitude, as in Turgot’s popular witticism, “[Franklin] seized the lightning from the sky, and the sceptre from tyrants.”²

Modern readers are duly suspicious of such utopian pronouncements. In hindsight, they recognize that the Enlightenment never existed as a homogeneous set of ideas or as a coherent ideological program. Instead, opposing understandings of enlightened thought and action coexisted, not always peacefully. Different schools and creeds formed rigid antagonisms, surprising coalitions, new mixtures. The Enlightenment was obviously not the sum total of its constituent parts – empiricism, deism, moral-sense philosophy, economic liberalism, republicanism, revolutionary utopianism, and so forth – because these parts don’t add up. Nevertheless, we can speak of the Enlightenment once we recognize that under this heading, disparate forces interacted in a common attempt to redefine the meaning of human reason.

The Enlightenment, in other words, did not exist as a set of shared beliefs and convictions, but it produced shared ways of arguing a point as rational.

Thus, whatever ideological stance it took, enlightened reason always regarded itself as a *critical*, *democratic*, and *constructive* faculty. Reason was considered a *critical* faculty because it attempted to free human understanding from *dóxa* or *opinion*. That is, reason freed human understanding from “that Assent, which we give to any Proposition as true, of whose Truth yet we have no certain Knowledge” (John Locke).³ Hence, to exercise one’s reason in an enlightened manner did not simply mean to speak the truth; it meant to eliminate a falsely established belief. Even more: to exercise one’s reason meant to speak and act against all authorities that had an interest in perpetuating falsehood. To exercise one’s reason meant to distrust the official pronouncements of ruling powers and elites. Along these lines, to read Greek or to be a good rhetorician did not make a person more reasonable but more powerful. Consequently, when Franklin proposed the solution to a specific problem in physics (in a letter to John Perkins), he concluded: “If my Hypothesis is not the Truth itself, it is least as naked: For I have not . . . disguis’d my Nonsense in Greek, cloth’d it in Algebra, or adorn’d it with Fluxions” (P 4: 442).

Enlightened knowledge, Franklin implies, exists independently of the “schools,” independently, that is, of scholastic learning and, in this case, mathematical training. In Franklin’s times, to be reasonable did not mean to be more intelligent or more learned than the next man, but it meant to free oneself from dogmatic beliefs. Thus, the exercise of one’s reason was not simply an act of confirmation. On the contrary, people like Franklin almost habitually suspected that official censure is always directed against truth. Looking back on his youthful conversion to deism (that is, to a post-Christian brand of enlightened religion), he noted in *The Autobiography* that he took this step because “[s]ome Books *against* Deism fell into my Hands . . . It happened that they wrought an Effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them” (A 113–14, emphasis added). Not just the veracity but the ill repute of deism convinced him to become “a thorough Deist.”

Enlightened reason was not based on wisdom, tradition, or authoritative institutionalization. It is in this sense that enlightened reason was considered not only a critical but also a *democratic* faculty – even though that was not the term used by Franklin and his contemporaries. Indeed, the word *democracy* for most of them had a pejorative meaning, connoting demagoguery and mob-rule. Instead, they spoke of democratic reason as *common sense*, a sense of reason common to all people, regardless of social status and educational background.

Common-sense philosophy combined the democratic and the critical aspects of enlightened reason. It argued that truth is always plain. People require no superior intellect to understand what is true. Nevertheless, it was held that most people are actually unable to discern plain truth, because they have never learned to trust their own senses. Instead, they unthinkingly subscribe to established opinions (what contemporaries called “prejudices”) or to the doctrines canonized by powerful institutions. Franklin reacted to this dilemma in the same manner as did John Locke and Immanuel Kant: he maintained that all received knowledge could and must be tested *empirically*. Knowledge needed to be examined by one’s own senses and reason and not accepted as what other people tell us or what we can read in books, even if ~~those books were written by great philosophers~~. So instead of simply *believing* that lightning is an articulation of God’s wrath (as eminent theologians asserted) we need to *examine* lightning with our own eyes – and we will come to different conclusions. Transferred to the political realm, this “courage to think for oneself,” as Kant called it, had far-reaching consequences.⁴ Suddenly, no power on earth was exempt from critical scrutiny.

Franklin symbolized this democratic aspect of enlightened reason in more than one way. When he claimed that it is more important to know what a man can do than where he comes from, he was essentially talking about himself, both as a self-made man and as an American. Franklin’s popularity among European (especially French) intellectuals in the eighteenth century had everything to do with his marginal status as a colonial. After all, there was something inherently provincial in the Enlightenment’s conviction that truth is a matter of common sense and free public deliberation, and not a matter of divine inspiration, social standing, or scholastic training. Franklin shrewdly exploited this topos when he went to Versailles dressed as a backwoodsman. In this manner, Dr. Franklin, the beaver-hatted member of the Royal Medical Society in Paris, came to embody the worldwide commonality of enlightened reason: an American, a wilderness philosopher, solves some of the most difficult problems of European science – what better proof for the universality of human reason!

Far from being a merely affirmative or contemplative faculty, enlightened reason saw and presented itself as a force that actively shapes and improves human living conditions. Enlightened reason is thus a *constructive* faculty. In this view, to understand nature ultimately means to domesticate nature. And to domesticate nature – to seize the lightning from the sky – means to construct new possibilities and environments for human life in the service of communal, perhaps even universal, well-being. Enlightened ideologies may fight over the actual features of these rational environments and over the ways to get there, but they share a fundamental optimism

concerning the malleability of human society (though not concerning the goodness of human nature). In this sense, there is an inherent connection between Franklin's lightning rods and his establishment of lending libraries (making education accessible to all people, not just to a small coterie of learned men), between his experiments in electricity and his various political projects, from his vision of a Greater Britain in the 1750s to his advocacy of American independence in the 1770s and on to the federalist constitutionalism of his final years. In all these cases, human thought and action are supposed to do more than understand and praise an existing, divinely ordained order of things. Human thought and action now exhibit their divine origins – as most enlightened thinkers believed – by devising projects of self-improvement. More than any other American founder, Franklin has come to represent this enlightened paradigm, in which reason no longer moves from Platonic astonishment to pious trust but actively distrusts the necessity of things as they are. This kind of reason confidently works to construct new worlds for human happiness.

II

We could stop here and come away with a heroic image of Franklin and the Enlightenment. However, Franklin was not born a paragon of the American Enlightenment but had to be *made* one, in a long process of interpretation and appropriation. Thus, if we want to understand Franklin in his own times, we should be wary of overtly homogenizing readings of his life and works. To a certain degree, even the contemporaries had their doubts. John Adams – no unprejudiced observer of Franklin's career, to be sure – wrote to Benjamin Rush on April 4, 1790: "The History of our Revolution will be one continued Lye from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical Rod smote the Earth and out sprang General Washington."⁵

Adams's sarcasm draws our attention to the fundamentally *historical* character of the American Enlightenment and Franklin's involvement in it. Franklin's biography and the history of the early republic are revealingly similar in this regard, because in both cases the process of self-making was far more diversified and far more contingent than popular versions suggest. Franklin's enlightenment can be described as a dynamic process rather than an unwavering commitment to a specific political ideology. This does not mean, however, that his philosophy was erratic, nor that it was historically idiosyncratic. Behind all positions he took and behind all successive roles he played in his day, we can trace a fairly consistent set of intellectual dispositions. Concerning these dispositions, it is difficult to argue against

the dominance of *utilitarian* thought in Franklin's version of the Enlightenment. *Useful* is a key term in his writings. "What signifies Philosophy that does not apply to some Use?" he asked in a 1760 letter to Mary Stevenson (P 9: 251). Even natural catastrophes were functional in this manner. Writing three years after the disastrous earthquake of Lisbon, Franklin reflected that such catastrophes are ultimately beneficial to human knowledge and human happiness:

[A] great number of strata of different kinds are brought up to day, and a great variety of useful materials put into our power, which would otherwise have remained eternally concealed from us. So that what has been usually looked upon as a *ruin* suffered by this part of the universe, was, in reality, only a preparation, or means of rendering the earth more fit for use, more capable of being to mankind a convenient and comfortable habitation. (P 7: 357)

Franklin's optimism should not blind us to the fact that almost all enlightened philosophies were troubled by the problem of *usefulness*, because the rational utility of cataclysmic changes, both natural and intellectual, is not easily established or defended. If human reason is at core a critical faculty, one that engages in questioning traditional commitments and obligations, what prevents reason from becoming a purely destructive force, doing away with time-tested checks on human depravity and eliminating necessary consolations? This was the question famously asked by Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). When Burke published his book, numerous competing answers were already in circulation. Among the most popular was the moral-sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment. Francis Hutcheson, for example, had realigned enlightened reason with traditional notions of moral legitimacy in *Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil* (1725). To Hutcheson, human beings have an inner sense – an unerring feeling – of what is proper and true. Thus, according to Hutcheson, our own emotions, if freed from authoritarian influences and social affectations, are the surest way of determining whether a proposition or an action is reasonable or not. If unadulterated, such intuitions provide *self-evident* truths, truths that all feeling creatures must agree on, no matter what their brainpower, social status, or education.

In an argumentative pattern typical of most Enlightenment debates, Adam Smith refined this idea by criticizing it. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith objected to Hutcheson's conviction that a given action is self-evidently moral if it is accompanied by genuinely delightful sensations. Smith rejected this idea not only because people can feel honestly good when doing bad things (taking revenge, for example), but also because a single individual is never capable of surveying all possible results of his or

her actions. What is reasonable to the best of my knowledge – and what my emotions honestly approve of – may still have dire consequences for my environment or for myself. Nevertheless, Smith wanted to hold fast to the concept of a self-evident, non-elitist rationality. Therefore he concluded that an individual can act reasonably by disregarding his own immediate interests and thus by putting himself in the position of what he called an “impartial spectator.” In other words, the enlightened individual, as envisioned by Smith, transcends subjectivity to assess the causal effects of his or her chosen conduct. Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* regarded the social consequentiality of an action as the prime indicator of its morality (without having to resort to institutionalized ethics and without leaving the question of morality to capricious emotions). In Smith’s view, the meta-subjective *public good* became the measurement of rational practice and the limit of individual well-being.

When Smith called on enlightened individuals to aspire to the meta-subjective perspective of an impartial spectator, he prepared for various later developments in enlightened thought. Thus, his critique of popular moral-sense philosophy came full circle in Jeremy Bentham’s *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), where Bentham defined the principle of *utility* as a form of self-observation that qualifies subjective needs and actions by weighing them against collective needs and actions. Bentham advised enlightened statesmen to reorganize society so as to achieve “the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” a formula he adapted from Hutcheson’s *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725).

It is helpful to view Franklin’s concern with *utility* in light of these other theorists and philosophers. Like Smith and Bentham, he thought that Hutcheson’s understanding of reason as an intuitive and emotional faculty provided a solution far too simple. Even so, Franklin shared Hutcheson’s commitment to a self-evident, non-elitist, indeed democratic rationality. Refusing to believe in the popular eighteenth-century dream of transparent emotions, he nevertheless upheld the idea that reason is common to *all* people and that the task of enlightened politics therefore is to ensure “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” In revolutionary America and the early republic, this utilitarian ideal proved particularly attractive, because its calculus was pragmatic rather than idealistic: it didn’t claim to produce universal happiness and equality but only to construct the most favorable conditions for pursuing both. Thus, utilitarianism was able to accommodate conflicting interests in a heterogeneous society. Most importantly, it was able to criticize established institutions of church and state without denying their social efficacy. This double attitude of radical

criticism and pragmatic affirmation was most obvious in Franklin’s concept of religion.

The basic stance of Franklin’s theology can be summarized as follows: he questioned the epistemological validity of revealed religion but affirmed its political necessity. At times, this attitude came close to claiming that the major good of religious faith is to keep the ignorant masses from sloth and insurrection.⁶ But such Voltairean resentment of the *canaille* was not a central feature of Franklin’s view of religion. True, his ideas of human nature were frequently closer to Hobbes than to Locke: “If Men are so wicked as we now see them *with Religion* what would they be if *without it*?” he asked in an anonymous letter from 1757 (P 7: 749).⁷ Nevertheless, like most enlightened writers, Franklin tended to stress the constructive aspects of faith over its prohibitive functions. Like Locke in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), Franklin praised traditional forms of religious worship because they provided a widely accepted foundation for social morality. The same, he thought, could not be said about some of the more innovative and radical forms (scientific or natural) of enlightened religion. Accordingly, in *The Autobiography* he recounted how his conduct toward friends and family deteriorated after his conversion to deism. In turn, fellow deists wronged him without showing signs of bad conscience. In *The Autobiography* he concluded, “I began to suspect that this Doctrine [of deism] tho’ it might be true, was not very useful” (A 114).

It is tempting to read this sentence as a victory of utilitarian (constructive) reason over deist (critical) reason. Yet despite his realization that deism was morally deficient, Franklin refused to reconvert to any of the socially more useful forms of Protestant Christianity. Instead, he designed an entirely *new* theology, which he thought would do justice to both his critical and his social-utilitarian interests. His early attempts at biblical iconoclasm can be read in this way, as when he devised new and more enlightened versions of the Lord’s Prayer (P 1: 99, 101ff.) or of the first chapter of the Book of Job (Smyth 7: 432). Even more outspoken are his religious proposals in *The Autobiography*, where he offered a multi-denominational catalogue of principles said to contain “the Essentials of every known Religion,” while being “free of everything that might shock the Professors of any Religion” (A 162). Ultimately, this basic version of human belief was closer to deism than to traditional Christian forms of worship, but it attempted to make critical reason socially useful.

On the whole, what Franklin presented was a natural religion with the additional assumption that God created human beings not only as rational but as moral beings. Thus, similar to earlier enlightened notions of a non-institutionalized, popular *ur-form* of Christianity, such as in Locke’s

Reasonableness of Christianity, Franklin's universal religion claimed to be comprehensible to all people without specialized training or authoritative exegesis. It was a self-evident faith. More importantly, it was a democratic faith, and this not only because the people at large could believe in it, but because the anti-schismatic character of this faith made possible the close cohabitation of widely different kinds of people. In this sense, Franklin's enlightened theology aimed not at establishing an unrivaled dogmatic truth but at organizing a peacefully inhabitable social environment in the face of religious diversity.

It is no coincidence that this idea took center stage in the writings of an American colonial. Like most American founders, Franklin was deeply concerned with problems posed and solutions suggested by a cultural environment unlike any in eighteenth-century Europe. In fact, to say that a certain idea might be true, but not very useful, takes on a special meaning and urgency in a diversified frontier and settlement culture. Franklin explicitly searched for religious and political institutions that were suitable and necessary for the highly improbable formation of a post-classical, post-European republic in faraway provinces. That he did not want to have this search confused with traditional forms of worship and government is evident in the name he proposed for his new sect (which was to be organized as a secret society): "the Society of the *Free and Easy*" (A 163).

Franklin's proposed Society of the Free and Easy cannot be written off as simply a case of secularization, substituting the old clergy with the new bourgeois priests of worldly reason. His friendship with the most celebrated evangelist of his time is a case in point. Apparently, what Franklin found congenial in George Whitefield was not the doctrine of immediate grace but the performative brilliance with which Whitefield advocated this idea. The orthodox colonial clergy objected to Whitefield's evangelism, because they regarded it as a shrewd stage effect, a matter of commercial self-promotion.⁸ Franklin, however, was intrigued exactly by this point. Having a professional interest in social engineering, as most American founders had, he concerned himself less with Whitefield's message than with the methodical stringency with which the itinerant preacher transformed his body and voice into perfect instruments of mass persuasion:

He had a loud and clear Voice, and articulated his Words and Sentences so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great Distance . . . His Delivery . . . was so improv'd by frequent Repetitions, that every Accent, every Emphasis, every Modulation of Voice, was so perfectly well turn'd and well plac'd, that without being interested in the Subject, one could not help being pleas'd with the Discourse. (A 179-80)

Franklin went on to calculate that Whitefield's voice could be heard by 30,000 people simultaneously, if each person in his audience took up two square feet. The author of *Poor Richard's Almanack* – himself a master of modern mass-communication – apparently recognized his own kind here. While Franklin might have found little truth in Whitefield's doctrine, he was so impressed by the preacher's *savoir faire* that he immediately responded to the sermon's appeal and donated money to Whitefield's orphanage in Georgia – not, however, without securing for himself the printing rights for the sermons of George Whitefield, with whom he now entered into a "civil Friendship" beyond religious differences (A 178).

This episode points to a central dilemma in Franklin's utilitarian view of reason: such reason is useful *for what* – and *for whom*? Whitefield and Franklin, the first transatlantic media celebrities, are similar, because their careers, as well as their spiritual or rational charisma, were based on the purposeful application of ever more efficient techniques of self-promotion. So if Franklin recognized something revolutionary, possibly even something American, in Whitefield's igniting of what came to be called the Great Awakening, this was because Whitefield was particularly attuned to the communicative needs of a heterogeneous, latently democratic society. Similarly, Franklin's own social pragmatism best made sense in a diversified and highly mobile provincial environment. With this, some vital questions concerning the limits and consequences of enlightened reason in the eighteenth century arise.

III

Human reason is a critical and constructive faculty, so the employment of this faculty, according to the enlightened paradigm, is always a collective and communicative act. In this sense, Benjamin Franklin's fondness for clubs, societies, epistolary networks, and other formalized means of intellectual exchange is typical of the Enlightenment at large. Such forums for debate, concerned as they are with discursive rules and regulations, pay tribute to the enlightened conviction that there can be no such thing as private, inspired, or genius-like knowledge. On the contrary, the Enlightenment holds that all human understanding is mortal understanding, requiring the joint construction, by mortal subjects, of meta-subjective methods of rational argument. As a result, enlightened thought has always been highly self-reflective concerning its own linguistic conditions of possibility. Franklin, too, was intensely interested in optimizing mortal, subjective reason by contriving ideal linguistic and social conditions for its employment. His Junto, for example, a philosophical debating circle similar to numerous others in the

eighteenth century, was meant to institutionalize, as consistently as possible, meta-subjective forms of communication. *The Autobiography* comments on the communicative guidelines of this club:

Our Debates were . . . to be conducted in the sincere Spirit of Enquiry after Truth, without Fondness for Dispute, or Desire of Victory; and to prevent Warmth, all Expressions of Positiveness in Opinion, or of direct Contradiction, were after some time made contraband and prohibited under small pecuniary Penalties. (A 117)

There is an irony here: Franklin's communicative reason appears almost like a parlor game, which, like all forms of competition, has winners and losers. Once more, we need to ask: *cui bono*? Who profits from this kind of reason? Franklin provided an answer in *The Autobiography*, when he slyly praised the "Socratic Method," defined as a way of debating that avoids opinionated or antagonistic expressions, only to add that this method helped him to obtain "Victories that neither my self nor my Cause always deserved" (A 65). But what type of reason brings undeserved, or unreasonable, victories? There are various occasions in Franklin's writings when this question becomes pertinent, as when the narrator of *The Autobiography* tells us how he relaxed his rational (i.e., vegetarian) diet after he smelled fried codfish in Rhode Island:

Hitherto I had stuck to my Resolution of not eating animal Food; and on this Occasion, I consider'd . . . the taking every Fish as a kind of unprovok'd Murder, since none of them had or ever could do us any Injury that might justify the Slaughter. All this seem'd very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish, and when this came hot out of the Frying Pan, it smelt admirably well. I balanc'd some time between Principle & Inclination: till I recollected, that when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their Stomachs: Then, thought I, if you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you. So I din'd upon Cod very heartily and continu'd to eat with other People, returning only now and than [sic] occasionally to a vegetable Diet. So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do. (A 87-88)

This seems to take enlightened utilitarianism to the extreme: a self-serving reasoning legitimizing whatever appears advantageous to the individual. Similarly, Franklin's perfectly enlightened treatise on *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency* (1729) looks a bit less enlightened – or its enlightenment takes on a new meaning – when we read about the results of this treatise: "My Friends . . . who conceiv'd I had been of some Service, thought fit to reward me, by employing me in printing the Money, a very profitable Jobb, and a great Help to me"

(A 124). Exactly this kind of pragmatic easiness and freedom led Franklin to praise industry not as a virtue in itself, but as something that helped him to construct a controlled self-image with which he could impress his neighbors. Thus, in *The Autobiography* he describes how he "took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the Contrary" (A 125). Not even narcissism seems to motivate this search for moral perfection, but a will to dominance and profit: "Thus being esteem'd an industrious thriving young Man, and paying duly for what I bought, the Merchants who imported Stationary solicited my Custom, others propos'd supplying me with Books, and I went on swimmingly" (A 126).

It is easy to see why sociologist Max Weber, one of the first modern analysts of the capitalist work ethic, chose Benjamin Franklin to illustrate what he meant by the word "rationalization": a "psycho-physical habitus" that subdues even the most private strivings to the requirements of material success.⁹ This is a very widespread criticism of Franklin and of the American Enlightenment, if not of American society, at large: freedom from external authorities enables the enlightened individual "to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do," especially for getting rich at another's – and one's own – expense.

Indeed, there is no denying that the Lockean tenet of individual self-creation enables the human subject to treat itself like an object. One possible result is "internal colonization": emancipated from external authorities – above all providence and chance – the enlightened individual turns into its own master and monitor, so that individual happiness quickly becomes an imperative.¹⁰ Not only financial success or social reputation but also spiritual fulfillment, aesthetic receptivity, and sexual well-being can now be pursued with economic precision and methodical rigor. Such rigor marks Franklin's model for the "bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection" (A 148). Franklin's model equips the moral subject with a catalogue of thirteen easy-to-follow rules, whose conscientious observance promises nothing less than absolute self-identity. As an autonomous being, Franklin implies, you can be happy – in fact, you *have* to be happy, because if you're not, you're a self-produced failure.

According to modern critics of the Enlightenment, such happiness demands a price higher than self-mastery: it requires that all moral, aesthetic, dietetic, and sexual needs be systematically subordinated to the laws of utility. This "dialectic of Enlightenment," as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno called it, threatens to turn the enlightened promise of emancipation against itself. Indeed, Franklin tells us that in practicing his thirteen character-building measures, he had to refrain not only from openly amoral

actions but also from jokes and puns. A statement like this seems to suggest that enlightened reason makes short work of the imagination and of other sensual pleasures. Ever since Romanticism, this has been a staple argument in critiques of the Enlightenment.

Again, however, it is useful to place Franklin and his contemporaries in their historical contexts. True, the enlightened skepticism toward received opinions contained a critique of *poiesis* – of human image-making – itself. But Locke himself did not criticize the sensuality of imaginative art but rather art's role in ascribing a supernatural aura to political and clerical power. The Enlightenment's campaign was not against imagination and fantasy but against endowing worldly institutions with an imaginary and fantastical nimbus.

On the whole, almost all enlightened philosophies agreed that affections and passions are essential parts of human reason, not its binary opposites. The utilitarian search for “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” may have been fraught with all sorts of practical and mathematical problems, but it adopted a firmly anti-ascetic position, as did Franklin when he ate codfish.¹¹ Similarly, the oft-discussed pursuit of happiness, as envisioned by Locke and later Thomas Jefferson, was explicitly not about the target-oriented hunt for one specific object whose possession promises final well-being.¹² Echoing Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689/1700), Adam Smith explained in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that “the desire of bettering our condition” is “a desire which . . . comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave.”¹³ Pleasure means searching and activity, not ownership and rest. According to this logic, Adam Ferguson concluded in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767): “Happiness arises more from the pursuit, than from the attainment of any end whatsoever.”¹⁴

Not surprisingly, enlightened literature tended to sensualize reason itself, frequently using sexual metaphors to describe acts of thinking and deliberation. More surprisingly for modern readers, these rational pleasures were often personified in none other than Benjamin Franklin, whom many have conceived as a prophet of bourgeois self-discipline and capitalist profit-hunting. Thomas Paine, for one, found fault with people who seek happiness only in the enjoyment or production of material goods – “[t]he mere man of pleasure . . . and the mere drudge” – contrasting their doomed lives with the example of those who will be truly happy in old age because their interest in philosophy and science provides them with “a continual source of tranquil pleasure.” Romantics may consider the concept of “tranquil pleasure” a contradiction in terms, but it is striking to note that Paine selected Franklin, of all people, to represent this sensual rationality: “[H]is mind was ever

young; his temper ever serene. Science, that never grows grey, was always his mistress. He was never without an object.”¹⁵

So if we decide to follow Weber in seeing Franklin as the embodiment of “innerworldly asceticism,” we at least need to explain what (or whom) Paine was referring to – and what it could possibly mean when Franklin's *Autobiography* defined itself against “the lives of . . . absurd monastic self-tormentors” (A 138). Attempting such explanations, we will probably find that what looks like a dark dialectic of self-mastery and self-denial was frequently motivated by the American Enlightenment's pragmatic tendency to negotiate between competing rational claims on human happiness. Thus, it may be more than just a sign of self-discipline when people go to the gym or keep doctor's appointments for regular check-ups. Nothing less than love of life may be at the bottom of such rational measures employed by people who are, as Franklin was, intensely aware of their dependence on a mortal mind and body. What we are in need of, then, is a reading of Franklin's Enlightenment that can account for the (aesthetic) pleasures of his writings – for his humorous styles and sly ironies, even self-mockeries – without denying their utilitarian basis, but also without reducing them to generic examples of purely didactic wit. By allowing Franklin to be interpreted in the context of his own time, we would gain a fuller understanding about having a sense of humor, and a mindset, different from our own.¹⁶

Notes

1. Thomas Paine, *Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), 699.
2. Quoted in Adrienne Koch, ed., *The American Enlightenment: The Shaping of the American Experiment and a Free Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), 53.
3. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 44.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Werkausgabe*, 12 vols., ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 5: 283.
5. Quoted in: Joseph J. Ellis, “Habits of Mind and an American Enlightenment,” *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 150–64, quotation at 150. The heterogeneity of Franklin's career and reputation is described in Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004). According to Wood, Franklin took on many successive roles in his lifetime: gentleman, British imperialist, patriot, diplomat, American.
6. Compare Franklin's Letter to —, December 13, 1757 (P 7: 294).
7. For a more open affirmation of Hobbes, see Franklin's 1737 letter to James Logan (P 2: 184) and his 1782 letter to Joseph Priestley (P 37: 444).
8. Compare Frank Kelleter, *Amerikanische Aufklärung: Sprachen der Rationalität im Zeitalter der Revolution* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), 295–310.

9. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988), 518.
10. For “internal colonization,” see Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 2: 489.
11. On enlightened sensualism, compare Kelleter, *Amerikanische Aufklärung*, 37–40.
12. See Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 251–57.
13. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, et al. (Oxford University Press, 1976), 341.
14. Quoted in: Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: Vol. 2: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1996), 339.
15. Paine, *Collected Writings*, 771.
16. I wish to thank Christy Hosefelder, Alexander Starre, and Daniel Stein for assistance and critique