SIMPLY to regard Benjamin Franklin as an extremely important scientist, statesman, inventor, writer, and organizer is to underestimate the man; in both folklore and historiography he has been a symbolic figure, the archetype of a "new American" whose roots are supposed to lie in the eighteenth century. Most historical judgments second the popular image of Franklin: Esmond Wright lauds him as "the most cosmopolitan, the most prescient for the future" of all the Founding Fathers, the "new man" who "saw no limit to the capacity of freemen."\(^1\) Henry Steele Commager discovers in Franklin "the adaptability, the opportunism, the passion for self-improvement and for doing good, the versatility, the homespun democracy, the simplicity and good humor"\(^2\) which characterized an emerging secular civilization. A second group of writers, critical of American society, have not changed the orthodox image of Franklin, but merely denigrate where others praise. For D.H. Lawrence, "Old Daddy Franklin," by virtue of his self-complacent optimism and bourgeois hypocrisy, "was the first downright American."\(^3\) Perry Miller, in his superlative biography of Jonathan Edwards, presents Edwards and Franklin as the polar extremes of provincial thought and practice. At one point, Miller asks rhetorically, "Why should not Edwards, like Franklin, accept the mechanics of Newton, the sensations of Locke, the free will of Whitby, and so lead the hinterland of New England to that economic exploitation of the Berkshires to which it was obviously dedicated?" Franklin's ideology, according to Miller a "blind acceptance of the blessings of materialism and freedom, reflected the nation's intellectual bankruptcy."\(^4\)

It is possible, however, to dispute Miller and view Franklin as the
product, rather than the antithesis, of Puritanism. Whitney Griswold emphasizes the influence of Cotton Mather's *Bonifacius*, usually known as the "Essays to do Good" on Franklin's behavior, but then goes on to argue that Puritanical habits and appearances were only the socially useful forms in which Franklin cloaked an opportunist essence. Philip Beidler's analysis of the *Autobiography* also stresses similarities between Franklin's secular quest and the "Augustinian" conversion experience. Phyllis Franklin compares Franklin's ethical, social, and religious beliefs point by point with those of Mather. She concludes that "certainly both Franklin and Mather were alike in the causes they favored: religious toleration, education, and science: and underlying their activities was a similar faith in the possibility of human achievement." Yet it is possible that she overestimates the optimism and modernity of both men. They share, to be sure, a faith in the possibility of individual achievement, but it is tempered by their repeated and emphatic pronouncements that the individual has a hard course to follow in a treacherous world, and that the select few who ultimately succeed both materially and spiritually can only do so when the hand of God supplements the individual's own efforts. In her interesting book, Phyllis Franklin makes Cotton Mather conform to the traditional image of Benjamin Franklin as an enlightened, experimental rationalist. She thereby ignores the providential source, which they both cited over and over again, as the foundation of their humanitarian endeavors.

David Levin is the only author I have found who has espoused the approach to Franklin I shall follow. Centering his treatment around the *Autobiography*, Levin believes that "we cannot overestimate the importance of his Puritan heritage, and his account gives it due credit." Levin does justice to Franklin's fears as well as his hopes for the future, and insists on the principled, religious character of his thought—if not the consistency of all his deeds. In the *Autobiography* Franklin is always trying to show the practical, concrete relevance of an essentially Puritanical moral code, though "by daring to reduce metaphysical questions to the test of practical experience, he sometimes seems to dismiss them entirely." But I will argue that if the language and style have been altered to sweeten the pill for a more secular age, the message itself is a rewriting of traditional Puritan tenets. Levin also perceives that the Franklin who is the central character of the *Autobiography* is a semi-fictional creation; Franklin the author selectively remembered or invented episodes which would illustrate certain moral or philosophical points. Having made these points, however, Levin's essay does not extend to analyze, the characters, events, and narrative of the *Autobi-
That is the task to which this paper is addressed. In the octogenarian’s reminiscences if not over the course of his life, Benjamin Franklin emphasized the necessity of a Puritanical life and man’s need for God.

Thanks to a stroke of fortune (or Providence, as Franklin would say) I happened to read the Autobiography at the same time as Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana. Although the Magnalia is at least twenty times as long as the Autobiography, anyone, required to read the entire tome, the resemblances between the two books are remarkable—so remarkable, in fact, that the evidence is at least half-convincing that Franklin was consciously writing the Autobiography with Mather and the Puritans in general and the Magnalia in particular as models. The similarities between the two works can be discussed under at least five general headings: purpose in writing and theory of human nature, philosophy of history, attitude toward Indians and alcohol, structure of the two works, and finally concern with the problem of reconciling vanity and humility. These similarities will be discussed in turn in this paper.

The Autobiography is divided into three parts (there is the slightest beginning of a part IV) written over seventeen years. The sections respectively describe Franklin’s misadventures before he settled down to the virtuous life (written in 1771), his systematic attempts at self-improvement (1784), and his public services (1788). Nevertheless, the work is unified by an explicitly announced educational purpose:

Having emerged from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and Some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far through Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducing means I made use of, which with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations and therefore fit to be imitated.

This passage recalls Mather’s statement of purpose in the Magnalia, written about seventy-five years earlier:

I . . . Report the Wonderful displays of His [God’s] Infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness, wherewith His Divine Providence hath Irradiated an Indian Wilderness. I first introduce the Actors, that have, in a more exemplary manner served those colonies . . . as to leave unto posterity, Examples of Everlasting Remembrance.
These juxtaposed excerpts not only reveal that Franklin and Mather are both educators who believe that the past can be of value in shaping the future, but they share an apparently contradictory theory of human nature and action, one which involves both free will and divine grace. On the one hand, "the blessing of God," to use Franklin's phrase, is responsible for the successes of Franklin and Mather's Puritans. On the other, individuals can be praiseworthy and posterity may, if it so chooses, imitate them. Both Mather's and Franklin's universes are large enough for God and man. A most important strain in the Autobiography is Franklin's concern with reconciling various philosophical dichotomies. Indeed, if they are not resolved, personal happiness and success, the social order, and man's understanding of reality cannot be attained.

It may be asked how did Mather and Franklin manage to synthesize the dichotomy of determinism and freedom. First, in one sense God and God alone is ultimately responsible for man's fate—or to be more precise, for the moral and material success of the God-fearing man. Immediately after Franklin announces his purpose, he hammers home the crucial role which Divine Providence has played in his life: "I desire with all Humility to acknowledge that I owe the mentioned Happiness of my past Life to His Kind Providence, which led me to the Means I used and gave them Success." This is no isolated bit of lip service: God intervenes in Franklin's affairs frequently and significantly. Save for Franklin himself, He is the most important character in the Autobiography. Franklin's parents prospered "without an Estate or any gainful Employment, by constant labor and Industry, With God's Blessing"; when he had to find a site for the Philadelphia Academy, "Providence threw in our way a large House ready built"; when he refused proprietary patronage it was because his "Circumstances, Thanks to God, were such as to make Proprietary Favors unnecessary." Equally important, Franklin never blames unfortunate occurrences, such as the death of a four year old son from smallpox, on a cruel God. Rather, he takes it as a lesson because the child had not been inoculated, and wrote a pamphlet in which inoculation was shown to be much less dangerous than the disease itself. As a Puritan would, Franklin finds a purpose in the boy's death.

Mather, unlike Franklin, does not write only about individuals. He is operating on two levels: the personal and the communal. Both the individual saint and the community of New England depend on the Lord. For example, Mather expressed the desire to write a "Biblica Americana," a sort of Old Testament for the New [Puritan] Israel. This, however, could only be accomplished if "the God of my Life, will please
to spare my life (my sinful, and slothful, and thereby Forfeited Life!)”
Mather continues that the real author would be “not I But The Grace Of Christ Within Me.” Similarly, the Almighty alone is responsible for the success of New England, a land which contains “churches ... thou has purchased with they own Blood, and with wonderful dispensations of thy Providence hitherto perfected and preserved; and a people which thou didst form to show thy praises.”

The function of God, for both Mather and Franklin, is to enable the individual or community to survive in the face of adversity. Only God can prevent the disastrous results of natural occurrences from falling on those whom he selects. Mather remarks:

Let us thankfully, amicably, and practically acknowledge what help we have received from the God of heaven ... the town [Boston] grew to be the metropolis of America ... that such a combustible heap of houses yet stands ... may be called an astounding miracle.

He then goes on to note that Boston had been delivered from French fleets, English tyrants, and various diseases which had ruined other towns.

Franklin, too, had many narrow escapes, most caused by his own “errata.” He ran away from home at seventeen; on the voyage to Philadelphia he could have become involved with a pair of thieving strumpets were it not for the advice of a Quaker woman. He trusted the fickle Governor Keith and undertook a journey to London which left him stranded without funds. This time he was saved by a religious Catholic lady, who allowed him to lodge with her very inexpensively (and whose conversation diverted Franklin from less worthy pursuits). Later, Mr. Denham, the pious Quaker merchant who takes him back to Philadelphia, performed the same function. Whenever God did not personally intervene to save Franklin, a religious person appeared in His stead.

However, while God preserves man providentially, He does not do so indiscriminately. Mather believed that “there is abundant cause to think that every town in Jesus Christ is worshiped has an/angel to watch over it.” Neither did Franklin doubt that “God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice, either here or hereafter.” “Constant labor and industry” produced his parent’s prosperity but so did “God’s blessing.” Therefore, one should be encouraged both to “diligence in thy calling” and to “distrust not providence.” In Puritan terms, Mather and Franklin shared a belief in “preparation”: God will not forbear from
bestowing his Grace on those who are good, goodness involving devoted performance of the calling as well as benevolence. They also, as a logical consequence, believed in the “justification of sanctification”: once God has bestowed His Grace as a result of preparation, the saint will desire to perform God’s will because he has been born anew through the Spirit. This “morphology of conversion,” a Puritan doctrine, was abandoned both by Deists and determinists. The former, when they were not universalists, believed man was saved based upon his freely chosen behavior with which God did not interfere. The latter group argued that man could do nothing to save himself. If he “prepared” to receive Grace through soul-searching and scrupulous conduct, then even this was determined by God. Franklin and Mather sought to preserve the middle way espoused by Puritanism. They were thus also philosophically conservative of the traditional experience of Western Christendom: they sought to retain a universe which contains both God and man without diminishing the stature of either.

God is not, it should be noted, a force in everyone’s life, but only in the life of the saint or the man preparing for sainthood. There is no evidence that any of the “villains” in the Autobiography or the Magnalia have their fates and behavior determined by God—indeed, this would be logically impossible, for God cannot be the cause of evil. The divine aegis is a blessing to be worked and prayed for; it is not a natural concomitant of the human condition.

Franklin and Mather do not only share the same theory of human action, but they are also in accord as to the practical steps through which man should prepare for and then justify his salvation. This involves four interconnected levels of activity: fulfillment of one’s calling, moral and benevolent behavior toward one’s neighbor, the worship of God, and, finally, the creation of institutions which will enable a good society to exist.

Proper performance of the calling is an arduous task for both Franklin and Mather. It requires, first of all, that one select the proper calling. Franklin’s partner Meredith, who became a printer instead of a farmer at the insistence of his father, was consequently unhappy and ruined himself by drink and gambling. When he moved to Carolina and set up a farm, he not only became a credit to himself and society but even wrote some interesting articles on agriculture which Franklin was pleased to publish. Franklin’s friend Ralph had a related problem: instead of being in the wrong calling, he changed from job to job and developed no calling at all. He originally wished to be a poet, and
persisted despite Franklin's admonitions. He then left his wife and children to go to England, "first endeavoring to get himself into a playhouse, believing himself qualified for an actor." He then proposed to write a weekly paper, next tried to be a hackney writer, and finally decided he was really destined for epic poetry. Franklin in London, however, by his sound knowledge of a trade, "immediately got into . . . Work at a famous Printing House." It is each man's task to discover the work for which he is suited and then apply himself. While the gifts are from God, their utilization depends on man.

Franklin himself is tempted by two false callings when he is a young man: the sea and poetry. The sea functions for Franklin as a temptation: it is both the highway to adventure and the road to disaster. Franklin's father—a religious man, be it noted—forbids him this vocation. Thereafter, every time Franklin takes an ocean voyage in the Autobiography, disaster strikes and he must be saved providentially. On the trip from Boston to Philadelphia he is stranded for thirty hours without food in the rain and is nearly seduced by two strumpets. But he also finds a copy of <i>Pilgrim's Progress</i> on this trip, which symbolizes his "divine" rescue as well as the long education he still has before him. His first voyage to England is not only afflicted by stormy weather, it nearly leads to his being stranded through Governor Keith's failure to write letters recommending him to English printers. It was in England that he seduced his friend Ralph's girlfriend. He was also offered a swimming instructor-ship there, another watery snare which would have effectively short-circuited his future achievements. Franklin also becomes estranged from his friend Collins while boating, and as a result he cannot recover money belonging to a Mr. Vernon which he had foolishly lent Collins. Franklin's second voyage to England as agent for the assembly against the proprietor is also a near disaster: the ship would have been wrecked except for a lighthouse. And, finally, many of those in Franklin's narrative who cannot make good in their callings—Collins, Keimer, Osborne, and Rogers—are banished across the sea to the West Indies.

The second false calling which tempts Franklin is poetry. As a young man he wrote "wretched stuff" which "sold wonderfully." It cannot be coincidental that publications he mentions include a "Sailor's Song" and a "Light House Tragedy." Poets, such as Ralph and Osborne, never make good in the Autobiography. Franklin's description of a Dr. Brown symbolizes his attitude toward poetry. Although Brown was "very sociable and friendly," as well as "ingenious," these surface virtues are unimportant because of the man's inner vices. He was:
much of an unbeliever and wickedly undertook... to travest the Bible in doggerel verse as Cotton has done Vergil. By this means he set many of the Facts in a very ridiculous Light, and might have hurt weak minds if his Work had been published; but it never was.\textsuperscript{25}

This is the strongest condemnation of anyone or anything in the entire \textit{Autobiography}, except for Franklin's description of the Indians. The Bible contains "facts," and it is "wicked" to make light of them. Further, the only people who can be taken in by a travesty of the Bible have "weak minds." And Brown is a man who in many ways conformed to the ideals of eighteenth century rationalism. Franklin has no objection to religious poetry: he twice praises \textit{Pilgrim's Progress}. But secular poetry takes man's mind from his calling and causes him to delight in invention for its own sake. In this respect, if we are to judge by some of the poetry which Samuel Eliot Morison has found in seventeenth-century Harvard copybooks, Franklin was perhaps more Puritanical than the Puritans themselves.\textsuperscript{26}

Calling does not merely involve proper application in a profession but has a moral and spiritual dimension as well. Franklin believed himself obliged to make an effort to arrive at the impossible goal of moral perfection. He "wished to live without committing any Fault at any time, and thereby "conquer all that either Natural Inclination, Custom, or Company might lead him into."\textsuperscript{27} He made a table of thirteen virtues in a small book and scrupulously checked off each violation. While he admits that the scheme was doomed to fail and he was distracted by public duties in later life, nevertheless he states that he always carried the table with him:

And it may be well my Posterity should be formed that to this little Artifice, with the Blessing of God, their Ancestor owed the constant Felicity of his Life. ... I hope therefore that some of my Descendants may follow the Example and reap the Benefit.\textsuperscript{28}

Franklin's justification of his book illustrates an important philosophical point: the need for ideal principles, realized in practice, to subdue "Natural Inclination," as well as the bad effects of "Custom and Company." The table of virtues is described as an "Artifice," as, indeed, is civilization. There were no elements of superiority in the natural man, according to Franklin. This passage, his vicious discussion of the Indians, and the need for Providential intervention to save man from natural disorder establishes Franklin's dismissal of that theory.
Also noteworthy about Franklin's table is the way in which Virtues necessary for social benevolence merge with those required for occupational success. Humility and sincerity coexist with industry and order. Just as he refuses to divorce God and man, Franklin insists that all virtues are essentially complementary. In the Autobiography, moral and worldly success go together: his father, Mr. Denham, and himself are three prime examples. On the other side of the coin, unscrupulous great men do not succeed: here we may cite Lord Loudon's military failures, Governor Keith, and Proprietor John Penn—the last of whom refused to contribute financial support for the province in times of disaster.

Mather also believed that moral and practical virtue accompanied each other, and like Franklin stressed the importance of the calling. William Phips' rise is attributable to the same three causes as that of Franklin. These are honesty, industry, and the blessing of God: “Call him, if you please, the Knight of honesty, for it was honesty with industry that raised him. Reader, now pause and behold one raised by God.” Similarly, idleness produces sin: “Idleness increases in this town [Boston] exceedingly, idleness of which there never comes any good.”

The moral life, for both Mather and Franklin, involved a duty to one's fellow man over and above the exact and honest performance of one's calling. Mather writes of Boston that “extraordinary charity and equity, as well as piety, will become a town that hath been by the help of God so extremely signalized.” He was always praising the moral excellence of first generation Puritans lest the present inhabitants “come at length to forget the true interest of New England.” One such exemplary figure was Theophilus Eaton: “Exact in justice, honest, humble, plain/His private virtues were public gains.”

Franklin too, writes that “the most acceptable Service of God is doing Good to Man.” Those who have seen Franklin as a budding capitalist ought to think again: what could be more contrary to the “spirit of capitalism” according to Weber than a man who retires from business at the age of forty-two and then proceeds to devote the remainder of his life to public service? In addition, in keeping with his belief in the unity of experience, no subject which may be of social benefit is too menial for his attention. After he describes, at length and with pride, how he was personally responsible for the cleanliness and illumination of Philadelphia’s streets, he justifies this attention to detail as follows:

Some may think these trifling Matters not worth minding or relating. But when they consider, that tho’ Dust blown in the Eyes of a single Person or into a single Shop on a windy Day, is of but
small Importance, yet the great Number of the Instances in a populous City, and its frequent Repititions give it Weight and Consequence: perhaps they will not censor very severly those who bestow some of Attention to Affairs of this seemingly low Nature.... With these Sentiments I have hazarded the few preceding Pages, hoping they may afford Hints which some time or other may be useful to a City I Love.

This passage is uncanny. It anticipates and answers the future critics of Franklin's behavior. To those, such as Perry Miller and D.H. Lawrence, who argue that he never set his sights high enough, Franklin retorts that it is wrong to create a dichotomy in the universe between "high" and "low" things. If doing good to man serves God and is a vital element in the salvation of a saint, then opportunities are to be taken where they are found. The usefulness of an action is not proportional to the degree to which it can be theoretically elaborated, nor, as the case of Dr. Brown illustrates, is intellectuality either a necessary or sufficient condition of salvation.

There is an incident through which Franklin symbolizes this theory of doing good. He originally goes to a meeting addressed by "New Light" minister George Whitefield determined not to contribute but merely to listen to this remarkable speaker for his aesthetic merits. The cause of Franklin's anticipated stinginess is an intellectual dispute—Franklin believed it would be cheaper to build the orphanage for which Whitefield was soliciting in Philadelphia instead of Georgia. But Whitefield's preaching moves Franklin to empty his pockets completely. This episode illustrates that while rationality is necessary to determine the fields and methods of benevolence, there can simply be no choice, in the last analysis, as to whether charity should be practiced.

Cotton Mather "descended" to even greater depths than Franklin in his efforts to aid his fellow man. He made a spectacle of himself in Boston by preaching to prostitutes and sailors, and even sold his library and went into debt (and almost into debtor's prison) in his final years rather than cease his charitable exertions.

Franklin and Mather, in fact, took their beliefs so seriously that they extended the concept of doing good from disinterested benevolence to the formation of useful associations and eventually to the attribution of Utopian significance to the societies in which they lived. Mather's New England and Franklin's Pennsylvania and America became means to encourage imitation of their own experiences and behavior. Franklin founded the Philadelphia Academy, which has become the University of
Pennsylvania. Far from trusting experience as the best guide in the formation of character—his own early life, after all, was fairly catastrophic—he feared that:

the American Youth are not allowed to want Capacity; yet the best Capacities require Cultivation, it being truly with them, as with the best Ground, which unless well tilled and sowed with profitable Seed, produces only ranker Weeds.\(^{35}\)

Uncultivated nature produces only weeds. So little did Franklin trust the average man to arrive at the proper conduct of life on his own that he viewed the true aim of education as follows:

The idea of what is *true Merit*, should often be presented to youth, explained and impressed in their Minds, as consisting in an *Inclination* joined with an *Ability* to serve. Mankind, one's Country, friends, and family; which *Ability* is, (with the Blessing of God) to be acquired or greatly encreased by *true Learning*; and should indeed be the great *Aim* and *End* of all Learning.\(^{36}\)

Education thus consists primarily of character training for religious and sociable behavior. The life of the mind, for Franklin as for the Puritans, was a means, not an end, vitally connected with man's activity at every possible level.

Higher education did not exhaust Mather's and Franklin's concerns. Both tried to improve the physical and moral well-being of slaves and Indians, even though they detested their heathenish ways. Both were active in promoting smallpox inoculation, founded self-improvement and discussion clubs (Franklin's being modelled on Mather's) and finally took part in political revolutions to combat "tyranny," Mather being instrumental in the overthrow of Andros in 1689.

However, no quantity of good works could substitute for the constant and sincere worship of God, since only an individual in a proper relationship with God feels any need to be benevolent of all. Although Franklin ceased to attend public worship regularly in the 1730's, he proved a true successor of the Puritans in that he separated from the corruptions of the world around him to practice his own religion.\(^{37}\) He composed a set of *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion* which began with an invocation to "God . . . the Fountain of Wisdom" and closed with a petition to "Accept my kind Offices to thy other Children, as the only Return in my Power for their continual Favours to me."\(^{38}\) Franklin's reason for this separation was the same as that of his predecessors, although his experience was individual whereas that of the
Puritan's was communal. For both, existent churches were insufficiently concerned with the essence of true religion. In the early seventeenth century, the true believer confronted a church full of pomp and worldliness which enforced a tyrannical conformity; by Franklin's time, the problem was a variety of churches, all claiming sole possession of the Truth, engaged in petty, dogmatic disputations. However, the remedy was the same. Franklin and the Puritans both began by withdrawing to form a sect. But this was only the beginning. The good Christian is also obliged to propagate and universalize the faith. For the Puritans, this took the form of a Zion in the Wilderness. Franklin's equivalent was the abortive United Party of Virtue.

Even though the plan for the United Party of Virtue was formulated when he was only twenty-five, Franklin still thought highly enough of it to write at the age of eighty-two:

I am still of Opinion that it was a practicable Scheme, and might have been very useful, by forming a great Number of good Citizens: And I was not discourag'd by the seeming Magnitude of the Undertaking, as I have always thought that one Man of tolerable Abilities may work great Changes and accomplish great affairs among Mankind, if he first forms a good Plan, and, casting off all Amusements or other Employments that would divert his Attention, makes the Execution of that same Plan his sole Study and Business.

Franklin's vision of his Utopia would not be an inappropriate description of the Puritan experience in America. He begins with a description of how the world is ruled by the minions of Satan:

The great affairs of the World, the Wars, Revolutions, etc., are carried on and affected by Parties . . . the different Views of these different Parties, occasion all Confusion . . . few in Public Affairs act from a meer View of the Good of their Country, whatever they may pretend; and tho their Actions bring real Good to their Country, yet Men primarily considered that their own and their Country's Interest was united, and did not act from a Principle of Benevolence . . . fewer still in public Affairs act with a View on the Good of Mankind.

Such a negative view of human nature, is found throughout the Autobiography. Significantly, there is not one character in the entire book (the young Franklin included) who behaves admirably without being animated by religious faith. Franklin's late letters, such as the
following addressed to Joseph Priestly, second this picture of the human condition even more forcefully:

Men I find to be a sort of beings very badly constructed, as they are generally more easily provoked than reconciled, more disposed to do mischief than to make reparation, much more easily deceived than undeceived, and having more pride and even pleasure in killing than in begetting one another. . . . Devils never treat each other in this cruel manner, they have more sense and more of what men vainly call humanity. 42

The United Party of Virtue tries to correct this situation. It incorporates a religious code wherein God "ought to be worshipped by Adoration, Prayer, and Thanksgiving," . . . and "doing good to man." Further, everyone should exercise "himself with the Thirteen Weeks Examination and Practice of the Virtues," and members of the Party should be distinguished "by the general Practice and Habit of the Virtues." 43

There is also evidence in some of Franklin's writings, although not in the Autobiography itself, that just as the United Party of Virtue may be considered a modification of Puritanism to suit the language of a later age, the emerging American nation ought to be envisioned as a reincarnation of the New England in which the Puritan experiment was conducted. Franklin wrote a letter to Samuel Cooper in which America has a God-given destiny to fulfill, which consists of producing a more moral individual type and, consequently, a more moral civilization:

America's cause is the cause of all mankind. 'Tis a glorious task assigned us by providence, which has, I trust, given us spirit and virtue equal to it . . . would as men gained power over matter, they could cease to be wolves to one another, and that Human Beings would learn at length what is now improperly called humanity. 44

It is reasonable to suppose that Franklin retained his hope for America until the end of his life. Mather, on the other hand, had lost all hope for the Puritan experiment by the 1720's. For him, Boston had become a den of iniquity, and he consoled himself with anticipations of the apocalypse, which he presently expected. 45

A second similarity which unites the Autobiography and the Magnalia relates to their respective philosophies of history. Both Franklin and Mather are careful to set themselves in a historical tradition—or rather in two historical traditions—one consisting of great men and the other of those writers who celebrated them. It has often been remarked
that Mather's work is modelled on various classics. He invites comparison with the *Aenéad* in his opening line, and compares the Puritan establishment of New England under the guidance of God with the Trojan creation of Rome under the aegis of Jove. He then goes on to set himself in the tradition of the great historians and biographers of antiquity (virtually all of them). However, while Mather admits that we can learn much from them, especially the "incomparable" Plutarch upon whom he modelled his life of Phips, he also considers his subject of far greater value than theirs. The ancients may serve as models for literary style and as teachers of the function of historical writing; Mather may adopt Tacitus' purpose of exalting virtue and exposing vice as his own; but, nevertheless, "of all History it must be confessed, that the Palm is to be given unto Church History."  

New England Puritanism is thus simultaneously based on and yet transcends the heroism of antiquity because the present effort is in the service of Christ. Mather's description of John Winthrop makes this relationship of past and present explicit:

A Governor in whom the excellencies of Christianity made a most improving addition unto the virtues, wherein even without those he would have made a parallel to the Great Men of Greece and Rome, which the Pen of a Plutarch had eternized.

Equally, in accordance with the Puritans' propensity to model themselves upon Israel as well as Greece, William Bradford is not unworthy of comparison with Moses himself. Franklin, like Mather, begins his work with a description of his ancestral and literary predecessors. After expressing the purpose of the *Autobiography* he presents his genealogy. He is as proud of the steadfast Protestantism of his forebears in the reign of Bloody Mary, the inclusion of his maternal grandfather Peter Folger in the *Magnalia*, and the industry and virtue of his parents, as any Greek hero was of his descent from the Gods. Franklin also provides a list, albeit far shorter than Mather's of books which influenced him. These are *Pilgrim's Progress* (by his "favorite author," Bunyan), Plutarch's *Lives*, Defoe's *Essay Upon Projects*, and Mather's own *Bonifacius* the "Essays to do Good." Of the last, Franklin states "perhaps it gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life." Only later does he read authors such as Locke. Since Franklin tells us that he read eminently, there is obviously a reason these books were selectively remembered. They are all "Puritan" books with the exception of Plutarch—an author beloved by the
Puritans in general and Cotton Mather in particular. Bunyan’s work is an account of how a man, Christian, progresses through a world of traps and temptations to achieve salvation. This is what Franklin does in the *Autobiography*, and recapitulates as well the experience of Mather’s Puritans. Plutarch’s purpose was to show the ancient Romans how laziness, selfishness, and party strife destroyed the ideals of the Republic. He then proceeded to resurrect exemplary lives from the past with the hope of improving the corrupted present.

Mather adopted Plutarch’s methods as well. He ended the *Magnalia* with a quotation from the book of Lamentations: “Let us search and try our ways, and turn again unto the Lord.” Elsewhere he asks rhetorically: “What should be done for the stop, the turn of this degeneracy? I’ll show them the graves of their dead fathers.” Now Franklin also shows us the grave of his dead father—literally. Five paragraphs after the *Magnalia* is in fact mentioned as containing a sketch of his grandfather, Franklin shows us the tombstone he has erected on his parent’s grave! And its message is the same as that of the *Magnalia*, which inclines one to believe that he is specifically hinting that his views of his life, work, and the function of the past may be considered comparable to those of Mather:

Josiah Franklin
And Abiah his Wife
Lie here interred.
They lived lovingly together in Wedlock
Fifty-five Years.
Without an Estate or any gainful Employment,
By constant labour and Industry,
With God’s Blessings,
They maintained a large Family
Comfortably;
And brought up thirteen Children,
And seven Grand Children
Reputably.
From this Instance, Reader,
Be encouraged to Diligence in thy Calling,
And distrust not Providence.
He was a pious & prudent Man,
She a discreet and virtuous Woman.
Their youngest Son,
In Filial Regard to their Memory,
Places this Stone.
J.F. born 1655—Died 1744. Aetat 89
A.F. born 1667—Died 1752—85

(Note—Franklin parents' grave is the tallest monument in Park Street churchyard, Boston. It towers over James Otis' and Samuel Adams' markers.)

If Plutarch, Bunyan, and the Magnalia describe the model life in its totality, Defoe's and Mather's essays contain the means which should be used to translate individual conviction into social action. The Essay Upon Projects describes "political, civil, commercial, and philanthropic [enterprises]: national banks, good roads, lunatic asylums, professional or trade associations for young men and colleges for girls, military and friendly associations for the mutual aid of members." Similarly, the twenty-two "Essays to do Good" "laud benevolence in general and give special instructions for doing good to each group in society."

Mather and Franklin thus both consider it important to set themselves in a tradition of Puritan or Puritan-like persons and writers. They conceive of the Puritan past as a sort of "golden age," whose wisdom is to be conveyed to a present, corrupted generation with the hope of improving the future. Their view of history, when considered in light of their philosophy of human behavior, also proves an excellent device for reconciling another paradox: on the one hand, the same obstacles exist in sinful human nature, which must be overcome in every period of history, in order to realize an unchanging, divinely based same morality; on the other hand, each time and place embodies different circumstances which dictate that different means will be required to realize this fixed code. Further, each successive historical situation possesses as part of its circumstantial environment the fund of achievements and failures of past ages. Thus, the Puritans were guided by ancient Israel and Rome, but comprehended and sought to avoid their failures and imitate—but transcend as well—their successes. Franklin similarly was guided by the Puritans themselves in his efforts to create American society.

Two other similarities between the Magnalia and the Autobiography concern Indians and alcohol. Although Franklin and Mather did what they could to alleviate the poverty and ignorance of the Indians, they both believed that the hand of God was instrumental in the extermination of these people to make room for the chosen. Franklin wonders as he observes a horde of drunken Indians whether "it be the Design of Providence to extirpate these Savages in order to make room for the
Cultivators of the Earth.” This opinion recalls Mather’s interpretation of the pestilence which destroyed “nine parts of ten” among the Indians in the area of Plymouth. As a result, “the woods were almost rid of these pernicious creatures, to make room for a better company.”

Mather and Franklin both denounce the debilitating effects of excessive consumption of alcohol. One of Mather’s major points is that much of the immorality in Boston can be traced to liquor. He wails: “Oh, that the drinking houses in the town may come under a laudable regulation. This town has an enormous number of them.”

Franklin seconds Mather’s position. Aside from causing the ruin of the Indians, he attributes his own superiority over the English printers with whom he works in London to the fact that he drinks water and not beer. Alcohol for both men functions as a symbol of indulgence and lack of concern with social responsibilities and the diligent pursuit of a calling. There are also structural parallels between the Autobiography and the Magnalia as a whole, as well as between Franklin’s own life and the means through which Mather’s “saints” attained salvation.

Two-thirds of the first part of the Autobiography, which details Franklin’s Deistic youth, corresponds to the period before a saint’s “conversion.” It also parallels the section of the Magnalia in which Mather describes the “remarkable providences” of God in saving His chosen people, for the young Franklin is constantly teetering on the edge of disaster. But at the age of twenty-four, in 1730, Franklin takes stock of himself. First he notices that almost all of his misfortunes have come from those who doubted Revelation: Collins, Ralph, and Keith, included. Second, he attributes his misconduct toward Vernon and Deborah Read to his own irreligiosity. Earlier in the book, he had written that as a young man he saw nothing wrong with trying to steal the mistress of his friend Ralph, “being at this time under no Religious Restraint.” And he might well have added that whatever good fortune he had enjoyed was due to religious people: his father, Mr. Denham, and the Quaker and Catholic ladies who aided him at crucial times. He therefore repudiates Deism: “I began to suspect that this Doctrine tho’ it might be true, was not very useful.” No longer does he think “that nothing could possible be wrong in the World, and that Vice and Virtue were empty Distinctions.” Franklin’s “conversion experience” parallels those portions of the Magnalia which relate similar experiences on the part of the “saints.”

At this point, Franklin becomes “convinced that truth, sincerity, and
integrity in dealings between man and man were of utmost importance to the felicity of life.” He then posits the coincidence of Reason and Revelation:

Revelation had indeed no weight with me, as such; but I entertained an Opinion, that tho’ 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.

Franklin seems to have arrived rather early in life at a point which it took the Puritan divines almost a century to reach. As Perry Miller put it, “growing weary of the endless dispute over whether God wills things because they are good or whether things are good because God wills them,” they finished “by awarding judgment to both contentions at once.” Henceforth, Franklin realizes that it was “this persuasion, with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian angel, or accidental circumstances, or all together, [which] preserved me.”

From this point on in the Autobiography there are no more “errata.” In part II, Franklin works out his table of virtues and private religion, which completes his preparation for salvation. This corresponds to the personal, interior journey in a saint’s life. In part III, he goes on to justify his sanctification through the creation of useful societies and projects. Part III also may be seen as a parallel to Mather’s institutional history of the New England churches which the Magnalia contains, the churches being the means by which New England manifested its salvation.

Yet does Franklin succeed? There is no doubt that he is succeeding until mid-way through Part III, but I would question that he retrospectively considered his life to have been a success, as opposed to Mather’s belief that the New England experiment ended in dismal failure. The best way to approach this issue is through an examination of one more connection between the Autobiography and the Magnalia: the problem of pride and humility.

Mather’s work can appear slightly ridiculous because he ignores the fine line between vanity and modesty. He condemns his slothful, sinful life while at the same time apologizing for the deficiencies of a twelve hundred page book which took two years to write—during which period Mather published a score of other works as well as attending to pastoral and charitable duties. His protestations of writing in a plain style are drowned beneath myriad Latin and Greek quotations, involuted and prolix writing, and superfluous and repetitive references to ancient
history. His “poor” history of the churches is exalted above those of the ancients. Were it not for his constant references to the fact that he was as nothing, and all of this work was really the result of Christ dwelling within him, he would be insufferable.

Franklin, on the other hand, faces up to the problem of vanity and humility, and he seems to have realized that here was one dualism which was probably irreconcilable. In one of the very first paragraphs of the Autobiography he thanks God for his vanity because “I scarce ever heard or saw the introductory Words, Without Vanity I may say, etc., but some vain thing immediately followed.” When he prepares the Table of Virtues, he only adds humility at the request of a friend who finds him quite proud. But is not his definition of humility—the imitation of Jesus and Socrates—itself a bit presumptuous? Franklin concludes:

In reality, there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as Pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, modify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive... even if I could conceive that I had compleatly overcome it, I should probably [be] proud of my Humility.

Franklin’s great concern with pride and humility can be interpreted as a reasonable response to a problem which made Mather appear ridiculous. Franklin’s connection with Mather on this subject is even more striking if we introduce a letter written by Franklin to Mather’s son, Samuel, in 1784, the year in which part II of the Autobiography was written. It describes a conversation the young Franklin reportedly had with Cotton Mather in 1724, and was on his mind at the time:

He received me in his library and on my taking leave showed me a shorter way out of the house, through a narrow passage which was crossed by a beam overhead. We were talking as I withdrew, he accompanying me behind, and I turned partly towards him, when he said hastily, “Stoop, Stoop,” I did not understand him till I felt my head hit against the beam. He was a man that never missed any occasion of giving instruction, and upon this he said to me: “You are young, and have the world before you; Stoop as you go through it, and you will miss many hard thumps. This advice, thus beat into my head, has frequently been of use to me, and I often think of it when I see pride mortified and misfortunes brought upon people by carrying their heads too high.

Ironically, at the very time Franklin received this lesson, he was in his free-thinking stage. He had been responsible for a series of essays in The New England Courant under the pseudonym of Silence Do Good, a sly
reference to Mather, who had just written the "Essays to Do Good" and whose volubility was proverbial even in his lifetime. Young Franklin’s letters attacked the ministry, theology, and the bulk of the graduates of Harvard as well, calling them "little better then dunces and blockheads." But in the long run, Franklin changed his mind. If the above passage is interpreted as symbolizing what Franklin learned from Mather, its significance becomes obvious. Franklin notes that he learned humility from Mather—which probably means that he realized how foolish Mather looked because he did not comprehend how proud he really was. It also means he had Mather and the Puritans on his mind when he was writing the Autobiography.

Humility thus seems to be a virtue whose absence bothered the aged Franklin to a serious extent. One may well ask why, and this problem should be related to the intriguing question of why Franklin stopped writing the Autobiography just at that point where his most glorious and significant exploits were about to begin—immediately after his arrival in England during the French and Indian War. The most plausible explanation is that Franklin was old, ailing, and but two years away from his death when he laid down his pen. However, that is not the most interesting interpretation, especially since the last part of the book, dealing with politics, is rambling and boring.

Before the French and Indian War, Franklin plausibly regarded all his projects to do good as uncontroversial both as to means and ends. Everyone wanted libraries, clean and lighted streets, a fire department, and a college. Franklin’s mode of activity was to find something that needed to be done, and then simply go ahead and do it in the most direct manner possible. At the beginning of the French and Indian War, however, the province’s borders were vulnerable to Indian attacks because the proprietor refused to allow the Assembly to tax his holdings. In return the assembly refused to grant money to defend the province. Franklin sided with the assembly, and earned the proprietor’s wrath by devising, as one might predict, a voluntary association to provide for defense. All the while the proprietor is pictured as a villain, and both he and his attorney have nasty personalities. Yet Franklin discovers when he sails for England to negotiate the matter that the proprietor’s real objection was not to taxation. He only feared that the assembly would tax him excessively and indiscriminantly; upon being made aware of this, Franklin easily compromised the whole affair. This episode in England is described in the brief fourth part of the Autobiography. The resolution of the struggle with the proprietor causes one to question the
image of it Franklin has presented throughout part III, and therefore to question the premises of Franklin's political activity.  

Cecil Currey's research has revealed that Franklin's later political life contains all sorts of unfavorable details of which he surely must have been conscious. Even if he were not a double-agent in the pay of Britain during the Revolution, or responsible for suggesting the Stamp Act to the ministry, there is simply no way in which he could have honestly written about his greatest achievements and still continue to impress his readers as a figure worthy of emulation. As a result of his activities in England to have Pennsylvania converted into a royal colony, he obtained the appointments of his son as Governor of New Jersey and his friend John Hughes as Stamp Master of Philadelphia. The other colonial agents complained of his uselessness in opposing the Stamp Act, and the proprietary faction in Pennsylvania took advantage of the unpopularity which the Stamp Act brought on those who supported a royal government by putting itself at the head of the revolutionary movement. Franklin remained in England, misled the ministry (perhaps unintentionally) that the colonists would not object to external as opposed to internal taxation, arranged for the theft of some of Thomas Hutchinson's letters and their conveyance to his political enemies, and finally spent a great deal of time and energy promoting a scheme to establish the colony of Vandalia in the 1770's which could have been put to better use. Upon his return to America in 1775, Franklin deserted his old political friends, men such as Joseph Galloway, and allied himself with the pro-independence party. He became President of the State of Pennsylvania in 1776 thanks to their efforts, only to execute another factional about-face ten years later when he supported the United States Constitution. And morally, can his associations with the Hell Fire Club and the ladies of Paris be overlooked?  

I believe that Franklin, by the time he wrote the Autobiography, realized that in the political sphere, success and morality no longer went together. And there are two pieces of evidence, in addition to the abrupt conclusion of the Autobiography, and the indiscriminate condemnation of all parties and factions as a prelude to the discussion of the United Party of Virtue, which suggest the necessary divorce of good ends and good means in politics. First, early in the Autobiography, Franklin describes an Uncle Benjamin, after whom he was named. This man "was very pious," but "he was also much of a politician; too much, perhaps, for his Station." Also early in the work, Franklin mentions that he wrote a "Lighthouse Tragedy." Now the only appearance of a
lighthouse in the book is not tragic, but providential, for it saves the ship on which Franklin sailed to England when he went to oppose the proprietor. But perhaps Franklin is subtly hinting that his bodily salvation was, in a sense, tragic. Had he not survived, he would not have suffered the moral decline which, if we may draw a final parallel with the *Magnalia* and the *Puritans*, also came upon New England as it grew prosperous. Franklin could have learned from Mather once more:

The chief hazard of degeneration is [that] religion brought forth prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother. There is danger lest the enchantments of this world should make them forget their errand into the wilderness.

After two hundred years, both Franklin and his *Autobiography* remain enigmas. Should we believe his account of his wayward youth, upright young manhood, and then speculate that he regretted the moral corruption which accompanied his world-famous triumphs? It is impossible to know if much of the *Autobiography* is fact or fiction. Franklin deliberately clouded his activities with ambiguity through an all-too-deceptive sense of humor and theatricality. But it is fascinating that in some of his late letters, and his final testament show an increasingly religious bent. In this sense, he proved a true founding father for his country. Americans have always been acquisitive and ambitious, but they have defined and defended their actions using traditional, Puritanical religious values. The problem of reconciling behavior and belief which was Franklin’s remains ours to this day.

NOTES

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3. quoted by Wright, *Franklin*, ix.

5. Whitney Griswold, section on Benjamin Franklin from "Three Puritans an Prosperity" New England Quarterly, VII (1934); reprinted in Wright, 2-6.
7. Phyllis Franklin, Show Thyself a Man (The Hague, 1969), 81. For example, see Autobiography, 43, 56, Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana (2 vols; Hartford, 1855 and 1853; original edition 1701), 1: 25, 30, 37. Hereafter cited as Magnalia.
9. Robert Sayre, The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James (Princeton, 1964), 16, has argued the contrary position that the three main sections represent "three experiences in self-discovery and self-adventure) ... three bouts of writing which produced three forms and identities."
10. Autobiography, 43.
14. Ibid., 56, 193, 247. With respect to the Philadelphia Academy, the editors note that "Franklin at first wrote and then crossed out 'Fortune,' in lieu of 'Providence.'"
15. Ibid., 170.
17. Ibid., 2: 37.
18. Ibid., 2: 92.
19. Ibid., 2: 95.
21. Ibid., 56.
22. Ibid., 111-123.
23. Ibid., 95-96.
24. Ibid., 59.
25. Ibid., 74.
28. Ibid., 157.
30. Ibid., 1: 101, 149.
32. Ibid., 207.
33. Ibid., 176, 8.
34. Phyllis Franklin describes Mather's charitable activities, and those of Benjamin Franklin which are related in the following paragraphs.

36. Ibid., 150.


38. Ibid., 153.

39. Ibid., 146.

40. Ibid., 163.

41. Ibid., 161.

42. Franklin to Joseph Priestly, June 7, 1782, in Writings, ed. Smyth, 8: 451-452.

43. Autobiography, 162, 163.

44. Franklin to Samuel Cooper, May 1, 1777, in Writings ed. Smyth, 7: 56.


46. Magnalia, 1: 28, 29, 166.

47. Ibid., 1: 118.

48. Ibid., 1: 115.

49. Autobiography, 45, 46.

50. Ibid., 72.

51. Ibid., 58.

52. Ibid., 64.


54. Autobiography, 56.


56. Ibid., 146.


59. Magnalia, 1: 50.

60. Ibid., 1: 100.

61. Ibid., L: 113, 129, 123.


63. Unattributed quotations in this section of the paper are found in Autobiography, 113-115.

64. Ibid., 99.


67. Autobiography, 44.

68. Ibid., 160.

70. Ibid., 2: 11.


73. Autobiography, 49.

74. Ibid., 59.

75. Magnalia, II, 681.

76. For other examples of Franklin’s late religiosity, see his letters to William Strahan, August 19, 1784; George Whately, March 13, 1785; the “Defense of Religion vs. Atheism”; and letter to Ezra Stiles, March 9, 1790. All in Writings, ed. Smyth, 9: 202, 333, 520–522; 10: 83–84.