From a Bold Youth to a Reflective Sage: A Reevaluation of Benjamin Franklin's Religion

In eighteenth-century America religious beliefs defined the values which provided the basis for morality in public life, in the market place, and in social relations. Benjamin Franklin's own thoughts on religion remain difficult to fully understand. As one of the most complex figures in American history, Franklin serves as both the epitome of his age and its greatest anomaly. His religious beliefs illustrate this paradox. Some historians have emphasized Franklin the iconoclast, but others prefer to dwell on his later, more conventional views. In the only book-length treatment of Franklin's religion, A. Owen Aldridge traces a shift from scientific rationalism to a religion of the heart, while still placing Franklin safely within the bounds of deism.

A fresh examination of the evidence indicates that none of these approaches satisfactorily explains the complexities of Franklin's reli-

1 For example, William Cabell Bruce described Franklin as an "incurable heretic" in some matters of religion, and Melvin H. Buxbaum emphasized his political anti-Calvinism. Buxbaum also sees the portrait of Franklin as a benevolent deist as inaccurate. Bruce, Benjamin Franklin, Self-Revealed (3rd ed., New York, 1942), 63; Buxbaum, Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians (University Park, 1975), 2. Ralph L. Ketcham's short and succinct biography of Franklin stresses both his sincerity of religious belief and his lifelong commitment to skepticism: Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1966), 32-54, 163-84. Carl Van Doren's Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1938), which remains the starting point for any student of Franklin, is consistently sympathetic to its subject and allows the benevolent deist image to stand. For a quick sampling of a variety of opinions on Franklin from Van Doren to the scathing assessment of D. H. Lawrence, see Wilbur R. Jacobs, Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher or Materialist? (New York, 1972). Arthur Bernon Tourtellot notes that Franklin retained "most of the pragmatic and none of the dogmatic content of Puritanism" but offers no extended probe of religion: Benjamin Franklin: The Shaping of a Genius, the Boston Years (Garden City, 1977), 436. The most recent biography of Franklin emphasizes the philosopher-statesman's rationalism, but quotes Franklin's deist creed from various sources with little analysis or comment: Esmond Wright, Franklin of Philadelphia (Cambridge, 1986), 44-50.

2 Alfred Owen Aldridge, Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God (Durham, 1967), 18, 81, and passim.
religious views. If his early writings are to be taken seriously—and clearly they ought to be—and if they are to be reconciled with Franklin's later professions of deism, then a new explanation emerges. Rather than a clear shift from strident skepticism to a more acceptable variety of deism, Franklin remains fairly consistent in his religious views from his youth to his last years. What occurs instead is a division between his public and his private opinions. Indeed, as Franklin proceeds to sort out the two, the latter almost disappears, cropping up only occasionally in dark pronouncements about the state of humanity. At the same time, Franklin's airings of deistic principles progressively degenerate to formulaic citations calculated to satisfy the demands of Franklin's image as an eighteenth-century public figure. Such a split allows Franklin's sporadic pessimism to coexist with his more well-known optimism.

Franklin limited his metaphysical speculations to a few public documents and private letters written, for the most part, prior to 1745. Owing to the sparseness of Franklin's comments, his religious opinions remain obscure and sometimes appear inconsistent. In his earliest writings Franklin revealed a clear tendency toward free-thinking and the most radical expressions of eighteenth-century skepticism. Nevertheless, Franklin's mature reflections appear to rest in a comfortable reliance upon deism which, while out of step with the religious orthodoxy of both Europe and the colonies, at least commanded a following of respected leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. Though Franklin may have even been a "covert nonbeliever," he sensibly kept such an unconventional notion to himself.3

Characteristically, Franklin presented himself as a deist and, like other eighteenth-century deists, he used the principles of the design argument to support his assertions. That argument, which supposes that order and intricacy in nature provide adequate evidence of a

purposeful creator, has roots in antiquity. Its resurgence occurred, however, with the new science of late seventeenth-century England and the work of Sir Isaac Newton. The design argument played a major role in the works of many deists and believers in rational religion during this period.\textsuperscript{4} Indeed, such orthodox figures as Cotton Mather also saw fit to make extensive use of the argument from design.\textsuperscript{5} While the argument is a well-known intellectual device of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its pervasiveness remains uncharted and its specific role in Franklin's religion untraced. Franklin used the argument from design sparingly and only rarely concerned himself with the final cause of the universe, but by examining his relevant works with an eye to the conventions identified with this rationalistic argument, the essentials of his religion become clearer.

Franklin left no decisive evidence of his thoughts on the absolute or final causes which so occupied his contemporaries. He spent most of his life avoiding ultimate and final statements on any topic. Instead, as a philosopher, he tended to emphasize the actual effects resulting from thoughts and the incompleteness or state of becoming of the universe. Franklin discovered deism when still in his teens and continued to espouse its principles throughout his long life. He virtually abandoned the design argument, however, after the mid-1740s and later even parodied it. His use of the design argument, one of the fundamental principles of rational religion, and its change over time illuminates the problem of Franklin's position as a deist.

Unlike others who experimented with and wrote about the new science, Franklin rarely used the language of design in his scientific works.\textsuperscript{6} As a scientist, he believed that it was not "of much Importance to us to know the Manner in which Nature executes her Laws; 'tis


\textsuperscript{5} There are many examples of the design argument in Mather's \textit{The Christian Philosopher}. At one point Mather notes, "Who can behold a Machine composed of so many Parts . . . without crying out, Who can be compared to the Lord!" \textit{The Christian Philosopher} (1721; reprint, Gainesville, FL., 1968), 232.

\textsuperscript{6} While Cotton Mather's \textit{The Christian Philosopher} is one of the more familiar eighteenth-century American scientific works saturated with the design argument, see also the Boyle Lectures of Englishman William Derham, \textit{Physico-Theology or, A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of GOD from his Works of Creation} (1716; reprint, New York, 1977). The design argument remained one of the principal means of reconciling religion and science until Darwin.
enough, if we know the Laws themselves. This attitude reflected both Franklin’s pragmatism and a deist’s priorities, which emphasized the rules and regulations of nature. His early works on electricity, collected and published in London in 1751 as *Experiments and Observations on Electricity Made at Philadelphia*, illustrate Franklin’s lack of the metaphysical rhapsodies characteristic of other eighteenth-century scientists’ works. Only once did he pause to exclaim, “This affords another Occasion of adoring that WISDOM which has made *all Things* by Weight and Measure!” Despite this statement, Franklin most consistently remained reluctant to draw parallels between his scientific observations and the mind of God. His study of science existed apart from his concern with religion.

Among his early essays that touch on religion, young Franklin as “Silence Dogood” lashed out at the institutions controlling New England’s intellectual life. Published in *The New England Courant*, his fourth essay presented Silence in the midst of a dream. He observed a temple of learning (Harvard) and the exit of its graduates. They went in various directions, but Silence noticed that the “most part of the Crowd went along a large beaten Path which led to a . . . *Temple of Theology.*” There Silence realized the entrants were influenced by Pecunia, representing a lust for money, but “saw nothing worth

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8 Ibid., 12.

9 Though Franklin’s theoretical scientific works received wide recognition when published, his *Autobiography* looms as the most popular route to knowledge of its author today. As a propagandist, Franklin pictured himself as the quintessential American, an example for posterity to behold. Consequently, the *Autobiography* reveals very little of its author’s own interior life of emotions, convictions, or beliefs. The book reinforces a recognition of the lack of inward revelation in nearly everything Franklin wrote and a complementary emphasis on exteriors and appearances.

Whether Franklin believed that an inner spiritual world existed apart from outward appearances remains unclear. The *Autobiography* may reveal nothing of Franklin’s inner self, yet, by relating to posterity the author’s outward visage, it may reveal everything. The book does illustrate the difficulty of interpreting the meaning, intentions, and purposes with which Franklin wrote, and any use of particular arguments must be examined with the understanding that use by no means indicates belief or disbelief.

mentioning except the ambitious and fraudulent Contrivances of Pla-
gius, who . . . was diligently transcribing some eloquent Paragraphs out of Tillotson's Works." This scene reveals Franklin's early dis-
regard for formal religion, and illustrates the extent of his early excursions into nonconformity and liberal belief.

Eventually, Franklin's tendencies carried him further into the world of liberal religion. The appearance of A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain, published while Franklin was working as a printer in London in 1725, provides evidence of this movement. Having imbibed deistical notions and the tenets of natural religion, the young journeyman decided to answer William Wollaston's exercise in moral philosophy, The Religion of Nature Delineated. Franklin found the arguments in Wollaston's book inadequate and unconvincing, which prompted him to explore for himself the problem of freedom of the will. In this exploration Franklin made extensive use of the design argument for the first time.

Immediately stating his assumptions, Franklin asserted in the Dissertation that "there is said to be a First Mover, who is called GOD, Maker of the Universe." God displays certain attributes, particularly omnipotence, omniscience, and beneficence. God, according to the author, "is said to be all-wise, all-good, all-powerful." From this position Franklin pursued the logic of a god with these qualities and the consequences for humanity. An omnipotent God must have absolute control over all activity in the universe. Nothing happens "against or without his Consent." Human beings exist as the creations of God and derive all power or ability to act from his consent. As creatures of an all-powerful God, people cannot behave in defiance of his will, for that would deny his fundamental nature. Given the assumption of these attributes for the Christian God, Franklin builds his case.

If God remains both omnipotent and all-good, and people are creatures under God's power and influence, then all actions taken by those creatures are willed by God and, by definition, are good. "Tho' a Creature may do many Actions which by his Fellow Creatures will

be nam'd Evil," contends Franklin, "... yet this Proposition proves, that he cannot act what will be in itself really Ill, or displeasing to God."\(^{12}\) Humans do not exist as free agents but always act to further God's beneficent plan. Good or bad actions cannot be judged by their appearances, for that which seems evil may actually be good. Franklin later denies both of these conclusions, finding them impractical and difficult to maintain.

His early argument continues, however, and Franklin points out that to exercise free-will fully, a person must possess complete knowledge of all the consequences of actions undertaken. This would be impossible for anyone lacking omniscience. If God enabled people merely to take their chances, he adds, disorder would follow from their ignorance. Thus, humans must be ruled "by an all-wise Providence" who takes care to maintain order and purpose in the universe. Then begins the rhapsodic passage of the familiar design argument on the order and balance evident in the Creator's universe: "How exact and regular is every Thing in the natural World! How wisely in every Part contrived!"\(^{13}\) Franklin notes the beauties of stars, planets, and all animal and vegetable creations. He displays all the conventional images of the design argument, making use of them to support points concerning the omnipotence and goodness of God. Wonderment, fascination with the orderliness of the motions of the stars and planets, and an emphasis on perfection and wisdom—all combine to convince the reader of design in the universe. Franklin assumed that the existence and characteristics of the power that brought it all into being lay behind that design.

Franklin depicted God as "an ingenious Artificer" or as "the Mender" of creation and compared the universe to "a curious Machine or Clock" containing "many intricate Wheels and Powers in such a dependence on one another, that the whole might move in the most exact Order and Regularity."\(^{14}\) The Dissertation reduced the

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 61.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 62.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 62-63. With roots in antiquity, the "God as clockmaker" analogy was made popular in the seventeenth century by Robert Boyle. Ferre, "Design Argument," 674. For a discussion of the clockmaker analogy and the design argument, see Samuel L. Macey, Clocks and the Cosmos: Time in Western Life and Thought (Hamden, CT, 1980), 108-14. J.A.
wonder of the universe to an intricate machine, the parts of which operated in perfect harmony because of their perfect design. Once in operation, the clock required no further intervention from its maker. Chance played no role in the creation of the physical world and, theoretically, God need play no role in its continuing, perfectly mechanical operation.

Drawing an analogy between the physical and moral worlds, Franklin asked, “And can we suppose less Care to be taken in the Order of the moral than the natural system?” Turning to his main purpose, the denial of free-will, he again employed the metaphors and logic of the design argument to reinforce his position. If the universe resembled a clock with gears operating in perfect harmony and designed by the supreme clockmaker to be perfect in operation, it would be unreasonable if God “had nevertheless plac’d in it several other wheels endu’d with an independent Self-Motion.” These wheels would be “ignorant of the general Interest of the Clock” and would interfere with its proper function. Wheels with free movement would make “continual Work for the Mender; which might be prevented, by depriving them of that Power of Self-Motion.” If morality and virtue were the products of free-will, they would depend on a system prone far too often to error, requiring corrective intervention by the deity.

Since Franklin’s God thinks in a rational manner, the Supreme Being recognized what problems free-will would cause in an otherwise unflawed, mechanical creation. Therefore, God ruled out free-will. Thus, Franklin explored the unfailing logic of a perfectly ordered universe in its fullest ramifications for humanity and rejected free-will. The design argument, as used here, enabled Franklin to assume the existence of God as an omniscient being and to explore the consequences. Ever intent on his purpose, Franklin pursued the argument to deny the existence of free-will.

Having proven the non-existence of free-will, Franklin concluded

Leo Lemay points out that Franklin also uses the clockmaker analogy in a previously unattributed article from the Pennsylvania Gazette on infant death. See Lemay, The Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 1722-1776: New attributions and reconsiderations (Newark, 1986), 84-85.

15 Papers, 1:62, 63.
that there could therefore be no distinction between virtue and vice. "If there is no such Thing as Free-Will in Creatures," he calmly concluded, "there can be neither Merit nor Demerit in Creatures." People behave according to God's will. To pass judgment on the good or ill of their actions would be presumptuous and place people in the position of judging the will of God. His will is always beneficent even though we may fail to perceive the real good inherent in apparently harmful activity. The logic of the Dissertation employed an operative assumption of benevolent rationality in the mind of God. Even evil worked toward God's plan, obliterating the difference between good and bad.

Franklin's Dissertation displays many of the elements of the design argument. Assuming that the works of nature made God and his attributes self-evident, he sketched a being of power, wisdom, and benevolence who occupied a mechanistic universe. This universe operated on a strictly rational basis and lent itself to empirical investigation. Franklin's pamphlet followed its internal logic to the point of denying distinctions between right and wrong, and even denying the traditional concept of the immortality of the soul.

Having discovered that "indiscrete Disputations about Religion" ruined one's reputation, Franklin avoided further flirtations with amorality. When discussing the Dissertation in his Autobiography, he had long since denied the beliefs advocated in its text. Rather than denounce his conclusions directly, however, Franklin wrote, "I doubted whether some Error had not insinuated itself unperceiv'd into my argument, so as to infect all that follow'd, as is common in metaphysical Reasonings." Reason had its weakness—one mistake may lead the user in the wrong direction, multiplying the error. Franklin discovered disturbing conclusions in the logic of the Dissertation, and he feared the moral consequences. Finding that he left

16 Ibid., 63.
17 According to A. Owen Aldridge, Franklin's denial of the existence of vice amounted to atheism. It appears, however, that Franklin stopped short of unfettered atheism. But in denying so many of the fundamental concepts of Christianity, little remained that a conventional religious thinker would recognize as such. For Aldridge's point of view, see Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God, 17; and Aldridge, "Benjamin Franklin and Philosophical Necessity," Modern Language Quarterly 12 (September 1951), 292-309.
no basis for moral behavior or an operable ethical system, he drew back. Correspondence between the mind of God and design in the physical world could be used to defend extreme positions, and Franklin, once led astray, never pursued that line so far again.  

Three years after writing the *Dissertation*, Franklin designed, for his own use, a Sunday worship service. The design argument and its elements appear once again, but the tone and message betray a calm and benevolent Franklin contemplating the orderliness of the universe. No longer intent on displaying clever skills of argumentation, Franklin’s “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion” celebrate the goodness of God and the joy of worship. Like the *Dissertation*, the “Articles of Belief” present the arrangement and workings of the natural world as self-evident proof of a first cause. “Thy Wisdom, thy Power, and thy GOODNESS are everywhere clearly seen,” announced Franklin; they are “in the Water, in the Heavens and in the Earth.” God’s design can be observed in the changing of the seasons and the recurrent renewal of life among the plants and animals. All these things, Franklin’s reason suggested, required a creator. This reconstructed creator, described not as a watchmaker or “Mender” of the universe, worked instead as an artful “Architect” or “Painter” creating with infinite perfection. Mechanistic images, forceful and vital in the *Dissertation*, disappeared from the language of the “Articles of Belief.” Franklin exuded tranquility, beauty, and beneficence in his private ceremony.

Contemplating the human condition, Franklin concluded, “When I stretch my Imagination thro’ and beyond our System of Planets, . . . Then this little Ball on which we move, seems, even in my narrow Imagination, to be almost Nothing, and my self less than nothing, and of no sort of Consequence.” With eloquence and reverence, this passage reflected humility and a desire for a peaceful religious experience. Franklin now saw in the design of the universe,

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19 At least Franklin never published under his own name any item that approached the extremes of the *Dissertation*. If, however, Lemay is correct in believing that Franklin wrote the “Letter from Theophilus, Relating to the Divine Prescience,” which appeared in the *General Magazine* in 1741, then Franklin did indeed return to similar themes later. This letter also denied the existence of free will. See Lemay, *Canon*, 103-4.


21 Ibid., 102.
not deterministic purposefulness initiated by an omniscient God, but a vast and intricate network whose ultimate purposes remained obscure and unknown.

Franklin’s “Articles of Belief” contain more than a simple ode to a benevolent deist God, however, as other elements emerge from the text. The service begins with a few lines from Joseph Addison’s *Cato: A Tragedy* and proclaims, “Here I will hold—If there is a Pow’r above us / (And that there is, all Nature cries aloud, / Thro’ all her works), he must delight in Virtue / And that which he delights in must be happy.” Franklin implies, and that being takes pleasure in virtue. Apparently refusing to probe any further into the matter of God and virtue, Franklin rejected the conclusions of the *Dissertation*. Yet, curiously, the opening text is from a tragedy, and Franklin found his lines embedded in a speech by the leading character Cato as he contemplated suicide. The lines immediately preceding and following the above fragment provide a revealing context. Before the lines Franklin quotes, Cato soliloquizes, “The wide unbounded prospect, lies before me; / But shadows, clouds, and darkness rest upon it.” Then, immediately after the reverie, Cato concludes, “But when! or where!—This world was made for Caesar. / I am weary of conjectures—This must end ’em.” Touching his sword, Cato indicates to the audience the suicide which is revealed three scenes later. If Addison’s play gives any clue to Franklin’s state of mind as he constructed his worship service, then Cato’s speech expresses a profound discouragement and disillusionment stemming from an inability to come to any definite conclusions about religion. Striving for a peaceful religious experience, Franklin still entertained many doubts which the “shadows, clouds, and darkness” of this world of Caesar’s prevented him from resolving.

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22 Ibid.

Franklin continued to strive for a reasonable religion, however, and, in a major departure from standard deist formulas, proposed a polytheist system for the universe. Between the Creator and man, Franklin envisioned a gap so great that he believed it must be filled with intermediary beings. The rationality usually associated with the design argument crept in as Franklin reasoned that "the Infinite Father, expects or requires no Worship or Praise from us, but that he is even INFINITELY ABOVE IT." Yet, in a crucial modification on the Dissertation, man, endowed with Reason, also relied on his emotions as he is "enclined to DEVOTION or the Worship of some Unseen Power" and naturally craves "to pay Divine Regards to SOMETHING."

The something that Franklin chose to worship was one of a group of lesser gods. These beings may or may not be immortal, he noted, but are "vastly superior to Man." Assigning one god per solar system, Franklin believed that they served both as objects of worship for humanity and as more worthy worshipers of the Supreme Head. Intermediate gods resolved the discontinuity between an unfathomable Creator and the innate desire to know and worship a higher being. As was characteristic of Franklin, his solution placed him just outside the pale of even eighteenth-century America's most unconventional religion. The first tenet of deism calls for a belief in one god only, and Franklin clearly disregarded this important deist belief. The contradictory tones of Cato's speech and the polytheism of the "Articles of Belief" suggest another possibility for interpreting

24 BF, "Articles of Belief," Papers, 1:102. Jonathan Edwards uses the words "inclined" and "inclinations" for very special purposes in his Religious Affections. The soul, he said, has two faculties. One is the understanding, but the other "is that by which the soul does not merely perceive and view things, but is some way inclined with respect to the thing it views or considers...it is sometimes called the inclination...the will...[and] often called the heart." Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections (New York, 1935), 209. Although not written until 1746, the use of similar language is notable.
26 Richard H. Popkin "Skepticism in Modern Thought," Dictionary of the History of Ideas, 4:243. Aldridge sees Franklin's polytheism as "an amplification of the concept of the Great Chain of Being which had not occurred to any previous writer." This novelty in itself testifies to the unconventional nature of Franklin's deism, but Aldridge dismisses, though he rightly points out, Franklin's lifelong fascination with the concept as an unusual extension of conventional thinking. Aldridge, Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God, 29, 30-33.
Franklin's personal worship service. An avid student of Swift and Defoe as well as Addison, Franklin used subtle irony of various types to undercut the most widely accepted beliefs, values, and institutions of his day. The lines from Cato, taken out of context, have nearly the opposite effect when the larger situation and Cato's impending suicide become known. The passage no longer appears as a steadfast proclamation of the existence and benevolence of God, but rather it seems an unsuccessful stopgap measure in Cato's tumble into despair. Franklin's polytheism with its replaceable mortal gods ruling every sun and befriending Franklin takes on an almost comic touch as the design argument is once again pushed almost to the extremes used in the Dissertation.

After his declaration of "First Principles" Franklin continued, directing himself "to use a countenance that expresses filial Respect, mixt with a kind of Smiling, that signifies inward Joy, and Satisfaction, and Admiration." Franklin tempts his reader to conjure up a picture of a smiling, self-satisfied man sitting alone with his worship service before him mocking Christian orthodoxy everywhere. Following several readings, Franklin, still alone and (one assumes) still smiling, then proposed that he sing for himself Milton's "Hymn to the Creator" from Paradise Lost. The entire performance rests on a thin line separating serious imitation from cleverly disguised irreverence. Although Franklin later noted in his Autobiography that he periodically returned to his service and used it, the self-conscious image-making nature of that document makes it a questionable source for its author's true religious convictions.

Franklin's apparently dramatic conversion since the writing of the Dissertation resulted partly from his reluctance to pursue publicly the relentless logic of his earlier treatise. The "Articles of Belief" state a creed and outline a devotional service, and they lack the polemics of the earlier work. Written for different purposes, the two pieces trace Franklin's retreat from the extreme skepticism of his youth to

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27 On Franklin's use of irony and wit, see Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury (New York, 1978), 53-91. See also Stanley Brodwin's "Strategies of Humor: The Case of Benjamin Franklin," Prospects 4 (1979), 121-67. Brodwin sees Franklin's humor as ultimately serious in intent and as a methodological release for some of Franklin's most serious dilemmas in philosophy.

the religious position he assumed publicly throughout his mature years. Whether the "Articles of Belief" should be taken at face value, however, remains at best highly doubtful. The document clearly reflects his efforts to arrive at a socially presentable creed and perhaps reflects his efforts to practice that creed on himself. The details, however, hint at crosscurrents of doubt and possible disbelief.

Franklin continued to comment and speculate on religious suppositions for a number of years. The Junto, a "mutual improvement" society founded by Franklin and his intellectual circle in 1727, served as a backdrop for some of these excursions into metaphysics. At regular meetings members composed philosophical questions that they attempted to answer and discuss at length. Franklin delivered a paper to the Junto in 1732, entitled, "On the Providence of God in the Government of the World." In introducing this paper, the author reflected upon his role as religious philosopher. With disarming wit and his usual touch of irony, Franklin disclaimed any expertise in such matters, regretting "this rash Undertaking ... it being a Thing I am altogether ill practis'd in and very much unqualified for." Noting that his audience did not "believe me inspir'd or divinely assisted," Franklin once again relied on the argument from design to undergird his religious principles.\(^{29}\)

Denying the need for Biblical revelation, Franklin began with an explanation of his method of proof. Natural theology required no assistance from Christian dogma, and Franklin's "On the Providence of God" depended on no authority beyond reason. "I intend to offer you nothing but plain Reasoning, devoid of Art and Ornament," Franklin wrote, "because I know that no Authority is more convincing to end of Reason than the Authority of Reason itself."\(^{30}\) Religious principles derive from right reason, not received truth. Consequently, reason constitutes the only reliable authority. Explicitly denying the efficacy of revelation, the tract applies the design argument and relies solely on natural theology for proof. Thus, the methodology of the Dissertation remained at least rhetorically intact seven years later.

Having established the source of proof, Franklin proceeded to lay

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 265.
down his first assumption. Avoiding any discussion of the causal sequence often associated with the design argument, the existence of God is taken as a given. Further, Franklin indicates that all present at the meeting surely agree “that he is the Creator of the universe, for [else] that would suppose you ignorant of what all mankind in all ages have agreed in.” Nowhere among the opening arguments does the design of the universe stand as proof of the existence of God or of that deity’s role as creator. Franklin thus successfully avoided any speculation about the reality of God and simply advanced to aspects of the debate on the providence of God.

Franklin’s belief in providence rested on the assumption that God has free-will and uses it. He then drew connections with the human character. Once one admitted the free-will of God, and if one “will not deny that he has communicated to us part of his Wisdom, Power and Goodness,” Franklin contended, “. . . is it then impossible for him to communicate any Part of his Freedom, and make us also in some Degree Free?” The stance of the Dissertation now appeared untenable, and the free-will of the “Articles of Belief” was more forcefully supported. In providence Franklin believed that he had discovered “the Foundation of all true Religion” and that religion demanded worship of the Deity, supplication through prayer, and correspondence between behavior on earth and future rewards. “Religion,” he then concluded, “will be a Powerful regulator of our Actions, give us Peace and Tranquility within our own Minds, and render us Benevolent, Useful and Beneficial to others.” The public usefulness of Franklin’s beliefs clearly dominated his thinking and presentation to the Junto. As he noted, religion can control people’s thoughts and actions and thus help maintain an orderly society.

Eight years later, in 1735, Franklin participated in a much more public debate in which he defended a Presbyterian minister charged with preaching impure doctrine. This excursion into spiritual affairs further revealed Franklin’s desire to make religion useful and beneficial to the public. The design argument appeared once again, reinforcing morality and universal love. The pastor in question, Samuel Hemphill, practiced his ministry in Philadelphia under the aging

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 269.
Jedediah Andrews. Andrews’s preaching had alienated Franklin, who found his sermons dry and dogmatic. By contrast, Hemphill emphasized practical morality and virtue, and Franklin enjoyed his exhortations to do good works. Eventually Andrews brought charges against his younger colleague, charging him with subverting opinions. Franklin wrote *A Defence of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill’s Observations* as an answer to the charges brought before the church commission.

In the tract, the design argument enabled Franklin to prove that people should love both God and man. Love for God is manifested in worship of the Deity, love for man in moral behavior, and good works. “Natural religion,” the “Defense” reads, “or the Laws of our Nature oblige us to the highest Degrees of Love to God . . . to pay him all the Homage, Worship and Adoration we are capable of.” Further, Franklin continued, “The same Laws oblige us to the Love of Mankind.” But the real issue at stake was the status of the revealed religion of the Bible. Even the orthodox, he asserted, recognized “Revelation to be agreeable, to our Nature.”

Having admitted that, the censorship of Hemphill seems highly unreasonable, since he merely means that our moral obligations “are discoverable by the Light of Nature.” If the first purpose of the Bible is to teach us about God and our duties to him and mankind, why condemn Hemphill for arriving at the same end through nature? This was, of course, precisely the point where the Synod’s commission disagreed. Though natural religion might be compatible with revealed, the latter provided the basis for Christianity.

The argument from design formed the crux of natural theology, and on this basis Franklin defended Hemphill. Franklin found natural religion agreeable because it promoted public morality and virtue, and these represented the principal ends of Christianity. If nature and revelation were compatible, but nature a more effective teacher of the laws of morality, then its use in preaching made sense to Franklin. The commission behaved unreasonably, for they “condemn Doctrines agreeable to the main End and Design of the Gospel.”

Design in nature provided sufficient guidance and evidence of man-

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34 Ibid., 125.
kind's obligation to worship God, love their fellow creatures, and
strive for morality. Revelation, while not contradictory, was also not
necessary for the teaching of right religion. As for the truth of Biblical
writings, Franklin avoided casting doubt on the sacredness of Scrip-
ture, but neither did he endorse it. He proposed to defend Hemphill's
natural theology, not to dispute orthodoxy's revelation. Natural re-
ligion's emphasis on moral behavior pleased Franklin. Ethics often
occupied his thoughts, and he believed Hemphill's preaching to be
more useful than the teaching of religious dogma for inculcating
virtue in the populace. At the same time, he carefully avoided directly
challenging the religious establishment of Philadelphia.

Franklin's famous chart for the attainment of morality provides
another example of both how he thought about moral questions and
of the dual meanings which he sometimes inserted into his writings
on such issues. Drawing up a chart with the days of the week on the
horizontal axis and thirteen virtues on the vertical, Franklin inserted
a mark at the proper intersection each time he violated one of the
thirteen. Hoping to keep one line clear each week, he reduced his
program for moral improvement to a two-dimensional graph. But
Franklin also recognized the reductionism evident in his system which
he referred to as "a kind of Foppery in Morals." As late as the
writing of the Autobiography, Franklin still faithfully recorded his
system for posterity. Yet at the same time he recognized the folly of
it as a system for moral improvement.

Rarely missing an opportunity to poke fun at the religious estab-
ishment, Franklin wrote a letter to his brother John Franklin con-
cerning the fast and prayer day declared by Massachusetts authorities
for the expedition to Louisbourg in 1745. As in the systematic method
to moral perfection, Franklin's thoughts turned to orderly empirical
observation. Citizens of Massachusetts celebrated a prayer day to bring
victory at Louisbourg, he noted, "in which I compute five hundred
thousand petitions were offered up to the same effect." Added to the
usual petitions to God made by citizens twice a day and multiplied
by the number of days since the expedition's departure, he calculated

35 BF, Autobiography, 152, 156. For an extended analysis of Franklin's system for the
attainment of morality and virtue, see Norman S. Fiering, "Benjamin Franklin and the
"forty-five millions of prayers, which set against the prayers of a few priests in the garrison, to the Virgin Mary, give a balance in your [New England's] favor." If the mission fails, Franklin tartly added, "I fear I shall have but an indifferent opinion of Presbyterian prayers in such cases, as long as I live." Though Franklin elsewhere confirmed his faith in the efficacy of prayer, his reductionism for humorous effect suggests the resurfacing of prayer, his reductionism for humorous effect suggests the resurfacing of the extreme calculating rationalism of his early *Dissertation*.

Despite scattered references to religious matters throughout his life and other examples similar to those above of the conventions of scientific rationalism, by the mid-1740s Franklin virtually ceased to debate publicly metaphysical issues and began to doubt the ability of science to prove or disprove religious principles. In 1745 the Junto studied a paper by Cadwallader Colden that addressed the problem of the interrelationship between spirit and matter. Members of the society turned to Andrew Baxter's *An Inquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* (1737) to aid their understanding of Colden's thesis. Franklin, however, reacted strongly against Baxter's book. Though agreeing with some of Baxter's scientific work, he objected to drawing parallels to the properties of the soul. If Baxter's principles provided the best proofs of the existence of providence and God, concluded Franklin, "the Deist has a desperate Cause in Hand." An even stronger statement doubting the use of reason as an agent to discern truth had appeared earlier in a 1738 letter to Franklin's parents. In an early draft, apparently unsent, their thirty-two-year-old son wrote, "You both seem concern'd for my Orthodoxy. God only knows whether all the Doctrines I hold for true, be so or not. . . . I am not able to distinguish the good from the bad." The elder Franklins would hardly have been reassured had they received the message. The draft continues with remarks on the ignorance of mankind as a group, and it expresses regret that Franklin had been "frequently misled by his own Reasonings, or the wrong Arguments of others." Any agent or method which could lead to many and

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37 Aldridge pinpoints 1745 as the critical year in Franklin's religious thought: Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature's God*, 75.
38 BF to [Thomas Hopkinson?], [October 16, 1746], *Papers*, 3:88.
serious errors scarcely provided adequate proof for the rigorous Franklin on an important topic like the existence of God.

In the draft of the letter which Josiah and Abiah Franklin did receive, Franklin asserted that his project in life did not include the study of metaphysical refinements. Though accused of Arianism or Arminianism, or both, he believed such categories superfluous to any real issues. "The Truth is," he confessed, "I make such Distinctions very little my study . . . at the last Day, we shall not be examin'd what we thought, but what we did."\(^{40}\) Franklin's pragmatism surfaces strongly in this letter, revealing doubts concerning the practicality and utility of basing one's philosophy on truths and principles divorced from their effects and the behavior they precipitate. The letter also clearly indicates why a much older Franklin concentrated on what he did rather than what he thought in the Autobiography. Both drafts reveal a strong aversion to metaphysical speculation and important doubts concerning the power of reason.

In his study of Franklin, Aldridge views the shift of thought in Franklin's maturing years as one which takes place within deism. "The essence of scientific deism," Aldridge observes, "consists in reasoning from the harmony and order of the physical universe to the existence of God and his moral attributes." Humanitarian deism, by contrast, looks to the moral order of the heart and assumes that God constructed it.\(^{41}\) But because Franklin explicitly avoided any attempt to untangle the causal sequence which arrives at first causes, his position in either camp, at a particular time, remains uncertain.

Franklin had only a dubious commitment to scientific rationalism in his early writings, and he does not clearly replace it with a more humanitarian religion after 1745. If 1745 stands as a critical year, it appears so not because Franklin shifted from one kind of deism to another, but because Franklin retreated from metaphysical debates almost entirely. From this point forward, Franklin projects a more conventional deism, suitable for his public self. His private views,

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 204. On Franklin's discriminating use of the concept of truth, see also Lemay's discussion in Canon, 104-6. Remarking on a piece he believes Franklin wrote for the Pennsylvania Gazette called "What is True," Lemay notes that "the author has an almost Melvillean grasp of the different orders and structures of reality." Ibid., 105.

\(^{41}\) Aldridge, Franklin and Nature's God, 41, 81.
never clear to begin with, recede even further from Franklin’s writings and activities.

The underlying irony in some of Franklin’s speculations further undercut any firm conclusions about his private views. What concerned Franklin most lay in the realm of practical effects of thoughts, particularly with regard to moral behavior. In his early speculations, Franklin often found evidence of morality in nature and the external order. Nature, by some kind providence, gave forth the necessities of life and, through order, made them easy to obtain. The planets stayed in their orbits, avoiding disaster, and all the items of creation served a purpose which tended to benefit the whole. This view of nature enabled Franklin to make frequent use of the design argument’s analogies from the physical to the moral sphere. Those same views and arguments, however, failed him on the larger metaphysical question of the existence of God.

Alternately, it remained that greater purpose, the benefit of society as a whole, which guided Franklin’s reflections of moral and religious issues. As he wrote in 1735, “Morality or Virtue is the End... and if the end be obtained it is no matter by what means.”42 The argument from design proved extremely useful for Franklin’s purposes. The eventual abandonment of that argument paralleled an abandonment of metaphysical speculations in general. What had once been a means to an end no longer satisfied that purpose. Franklin’s use of the argument from design indicated a wide range of possibilities as he moved from the mechanistic denial of free-will expressed in the Dissertation to the benevolent provider of “On the Providence of God.” The language of design allowed Franklin to defend a Presbyterian minister and inspired Franklin’s precise scientific rationalism in his schematic plan for moral perfection. Nevertheless, at the same time that Franklin used the design argument, he consistently undercut its viability as one of the supporting pillars of rational religion. Publicly, the argument remained useful; privately, Franklin must have found it increasingly dissatisfying.

Some of Franklin’s more ingenious uses of the design argument appeared after he abandoned using it for philosophical purposes. Well

known and reprinted all over Europe, Franklin’s “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker” tied together practical effects and a theory of moral behavior using the language of design.

An even more direct parody of the argument from design occurred in a letter written by Franklin during the American Revolution. Both Franklin and his French friend the Abbé André Morellet enjoyed composing drinking songs. At the end of a letter on that subject, Franklin appended an appreciation of the human elbow.

Accompanied by a drawing which labeled the forearm A and the upper arm B, the postscript speculated on the purpose indicated by the design of this marvelous apparatus. Had the elbow been closer to the hand, Franklin mused, the forearm would have been unable to carry a glass to the mouth. An elbow too near the shoulder meant that the upper arm would cause the glass to go beyond the mouth. But, as he prefaced this meditation, “man, who was destined to drink wine ought to be able to carry the glass to his mouth.” Luckily, as if to increase our “piety and gratitude to divine Providence . . . we are in a condition to drink at our ease, the glass coming exactly to the mouth. Let us adore then,” concluded Franklin, “glass in hand, this benevolent wisdom; let us adore and drink.”

The humor of the story bespeaks Franklin’s characteristic irreverence for what he now regarded as the dogmatic argument from design. Having been so central to his earlier judgments about religion, his disregard of the design argument in these instances casts at least some doubt on the sincerity of Franklin’s later deist pronouncements. With isolated exceptions occurring primarily in private correspondence, Franklin never returned to an extended, serious treatment of religion after 1745. Yet, his interest in public religious matters continued. His revision of the Lord’s Prayer in 1768 and contributions to an abridged Book of Common Prayer in 1773 exemplified Franklin’s later concerns.

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45 “Franklin’s Contributions to an Abridgment of the Book of Common Prayer” [before
Scattered references supplemented by the *Autobiography* reveal a religious system remarkable for its consistency through the upheavals of the eighteenth century. Neither the Great Awakening at mid-century, nor the American Revolution, or even Franklin’s nearly twenty-five years abroad among the intellectuals of Europe revised his public expression of religion in any fundamental way. Practicality, evident in the above projects concerning the Lord’s Prayer and the English Prayer Book, consistently guided his thoughts on popular religion. Franklin viewed most formal religion as a means to an end, and that end was the inculcation of virtue. A letter of 1753 expressed his concern that faith be more useful in its effects. Using a favorite metaphor, Franklin wrote, “The Worship of God is a Duty, the hearing and reading of Sermons may be useful; but if Men rest in Hearing and Praying . . . it is as if a Tree should value itself of being water’d and putting forth Leaves, tho’ it never produc’d any Fruit.”

Even Scripture, according to Franklin, ought to be viewed with an eye to its practicality. In the *Autobiography* he recalled that by the age of sixteen, “Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such; but I entertain’d an Opinion, that tho’ certain Actions might not be bad because they were forbidden by it . . . those Actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us.” Scripture might be read as a practical manual for living. Relegating the Bible to the position of ethical guidebook, Franklin did not view it as a book of irrefutable God-given truths.

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“BF to John Huey, June 6, 1753, *Papers*, 4:505. Lemay’s commentary on an article he attributes to Franklin from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of May 7, 1730, provides an excellent discussion of the fine line its author toed on religion. Lemay notes that “Franklin argued against publishing religious satires that might weaken the religious opinions of others,” and yet he could blithely write a private letter to David Hume in 1762 that was “complacently sacrilegious.” Lemay, *Canon*, 43.

47 BF, *Autobiography*, 114-15. Franklin goes on to say that “this Persuasion, with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian Angel, or accidental favourable Circumstances and Situations, or all together, preserved me.” Again his relativism and practicality surface strongly as Franklin touches on all the possibilities for help from forces outside his control. He shows no obvious commitment for any one and a healthy public respect for all: *Autobiography*, 115.

48 By implication, Franklin’s views on the Bible and its usefulness would also apply to the *Autobiography*. On one level it is a guide for moral living, but at no level should it be viewed as the “Truth” about Franklin or anything else.
Emphasizing the beneficence of God as reflected in nature, Franklin found in the design argument one way to rebuild the distinctions between virtue and vice which he had destroyed in the *Dissertation*. Conventions of the argument from design provided imagery and analogies useful in promoting the doctrines of deism, a religion that he believed could encourage public virtue. Typically, Franklin espoused a creed which he hoped would be acceptable to most, useful to all, and harmful to none. In 1731 the young printer entertained dreams of an international brotherhood, a “party of Virtue” based on benevolent deism. The party’s proposed religious doctrines typified Franklin’s professions of deism. They included belief in one God with deistic attributes (polytheism did not appear here), the conviction that God should be worshiped, an assertion of the immortality of the soul, eternal rewards and punishments, a belief “that none but the virtuous are wise,” and, finally, “that Man’s Perfection is in Virtue.” These elements of deism recurred as Franklin’s expressed system of belief when discussed in the *Autobiography* and in later correspondence.49

Elements in the design argument enabled Franklin to mediate between his belief in a need for practical ethics for the common people and his strong personal skepticism of orthodox Christianity, but it did not blind him to its limitations or those of extreme rationalism. The *Dissertation* provided an early indication of the dangers of the argument’s logic, and the later parodies acknowledge its most ridiculous possibilities. The undertones of the “Articles of Belief” provide a key to understanding both Franklin’s use of the design argument and of his contradictory thoughts on religion in general. Crucial for public morality, religion remained an enigma for Franklin—from his early youth to old age.

Some of Franklin’s most well-known endorsements of deism appear formulaic rather than keenly felt. The doctrines set forth in the *Autobiography*, in the proposal for a party of virtue, and in Franklin’s famous famous reply to Ezra Stiles’s inquiry on religion in 1790, all strike the reader as rehearsed and wooden. “You desire to know something

49 BF, “Doctrine to be Preached” [1731], *Papers*, 1:213. For a list of the tenets of conventional deism, see Roger L. Emerson, “Deism,” *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 1:646. Compare the “Doctrine” to Franklin’s statement of belief in the *Autobiography*, 146. They are very similar.
of my Religion,” he wrote to Stiles, “I believe in one god, Creator of the Universe . . . That he ought to be worshipped. . . . That the soul of Man is immortal and will be treated with Justice in another life respecting its Conduct in this.” Franklin merely listed the basic suppositions of deism, without explanation or embellishment.

Despite his profession of a basically optimistic deism, the problem of a strong undercurrent of pessimism persists in Franklin’s thought. The scientific skepticism which led him to question Christian dogma discerned the fallacy of drawing parallels between the physical and moral universe. His powers of observation led Franklin to conclude by 1782 that the study of the “inanimate” aspects of nature evoked admiration, but not the “animate or moral part.” People, in particular, he mourned, are “very badly constructed” and prone to vice. They take “more Pride and even Pleasure in killing than in begetting one another,” he sadly observed, “for without a Blush they assemble great Armies at Noon Day to destroy . . . but they creep into Corners, or cover themselves with the Darkness of Night when they mean to beget.” The dark side of Franklin runs deep, for he condemned not specific persons in particular times and places, but questioned the value of the human race as a whole. Franklin mused that men are ashamed of procreation, “a virtuous Action. A virtuous Action it would be,” he continued, “and a vicious one the killing of them, if the Species were really worth producing or preserving; but of this I begin to doubt.” Here Franklin’s language betrays a sincerity missing from his professions of optimistic deism.

This deepest pathos occurred only sporadically in Franklin’s work, but it remains consistent with other elements such as an emphasis on the rule of self-interest, especially evident in Franklin’s economic

51 BF to Joseph Priestley, June 7, 1782, Smyth, ed., Writings, 8:451, 451-52. One cannot help but make parallels to the pessimistic aspects of Puritanism—the doubt and the belief in the innate evil nature of man. Though the influence of Puritan thought on Franklin has long been recognized, Norman S. Fiering disagrees. His concern is that Franklin’s “alleged inheritance from Puritanism” be laid “to rest”: Fiering, “Franklin and the Way to Virtue,” 200. Lemay’s discussion of “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker” also addresses the issue of Franklin’s pessimism and subtle satire. Polly’s speech, Lemay notes, ultimately presents a serious critique of society, especially in the Maryland Gazette edition: Lemay, “Text of ‘The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,’” 113-14.
thought, and a fear of religious skepticism among the people as a whole. Design in nature, so closely identified with the benevolence of God, proved inconsistent with such a low view of humanity. The lighter side of Franklin remains the best known, however, and the design argument reappeared in its old, unfettered optimism in a letter written in 1785. Expressing his faith in the immortality of the soul, Franklin reasserted his "trust in God. And when I observe," he noted, "that there is great Frugality, as well as Wisdom, in his Works . . . for by the Various Inventions of Propagation, he has provided for the continual peopling of his World . . . I cannot suspect the Annihilation of Souls." In this context, Franklin's call for prayer at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 seems appropriate. Evoking the deistic "Father of Lights to illuminate our Understandings," the elder statesman expressed his best hope for the future of America as embodied in his publicly maintained, enlightened religious philosophy.

University of Illinois, Urbana

ELIZABETH E. DUNN

52 On self-interest, see Franklin, A Modest Enquiry . . . , in Papers, 1:146. On skepticism, see BF to ?, December 13, 1757, Papers, 7:294.
53 BF to George Whatley, May 23, 1785, Smyth, ed., Writings, 9:333-34.