“He that best understands the World, least likes it”: The Dark Side of Benjamin Franklin

IN ESMOND WRIGHT’S RECENT BIOGRAPHY of Benjamin Franklin, Franklin of Philadelphia, readers will find the Franklin that Franklin always wished for and that the vast Franklin lore of the ages has conditioned us to expect. Here is Franklin the quintessential optimist; the harbinger of a new-style American man; the dedicated public servant devoted to the good of mankind; the patron saint to all who would, for whatever motives, pledge themselves to lives of industry, sincerity, and sobriety; the lover of institutions and things English or continental; the cosmopolitan, witty, and ingenious “Renaissance Man” of the eighteenth century, traversing with almost supernatural ease the disciplinary boundaries of science, politics, philosophy, religion, and commerce; and, finally, the rationalizer, dissimulator, and committer of youthful (but also of adult) errata, but one who was so candid and charming in his confession of these flaws as to merit if not praise, certainly not censure.1

It is doubtful that many will find great fault with Wright’s elegantly styled compendium of inherited Frankliniana. Like most Franklin biographers, Wright has fallen completely for a Franklin inherited from sympathetic writers and biographers over the past two centuries, writers that include, of course, Franklin himself. As interpretive studies of Franklin’s Autobiography have consistently demonstrated, Franklin held very definite ideas about the meaning and value he wished to see attached to his life and opinion. Invariably, as Franklin expressed them and as they have been expressed by writers since the eighteenth century, the meaning and value attached to Franklin’s life deliberately underscore both the optimistic or positive side of his

1 Esmond Wright, Franklin of Philadelphia (Cambridge, 1986).
opinion and the timeless appeal of his accomplishments to each and every "modern temper."\(^2\)

While what follows is not a comprehensive revisionist reading of Franklin's life and opinion, it proposes, nonetheless, a revision with wide-ranging implications of one aspect of his life and opinion—indeed, of his character—that in their haste to preserve the Franklin-of-old biographers and critics have on the whole neglected. At issue is Franklin's optimism: his tendency, as it were, to think only positively about the human condition and about human nature; his alleged conviction of the unlimited possibilities of both human character and the practice of what the eighteenth century termed "humanity" under the guidance of scientific progress; his disposition, in sum, to see man almost always in an exalted light and to strive to see the collective, utilitarian goals of mankind as objects worthy of praise and promotion. In examining these opinions routinely attributed to Franklin, one invariably comes up against what I would call his "dark side," a side from which expressions such as "Franklin's pessimism," "Franklin's contempt for mankind and human pride," and "Franklin's disdain for human nature" provide just as apt indices to his life and opinion as to those well-worn reminders of his optimism typically found in the indices of Franklin biographies. This is a side of Franklin we have been conditioned possibly to doubt, definitely to resist, but that it is a side which in public and private writings he admitted to is as indisputable as the evidence of him as the source of Poor Richard's opinion in 1753: "He that best understands the World, least likes it."\(^3\)


In what Light we are viewed by superior Beings, may be gathered from a Piece of . . . News, which possibly has not yet reached you. A young Angel of Distinction being sent down to this world on some Business, for the first time, had an old courier-spirit assigned him as a Guide. They arriv'd over the Seas of Martinico, in the middle of the long Day of obstinate Fight between the Fleets of Rodney and De Grasse. When, thro' the Clouds of smoke, he saw the fire of the Guns, the Decks covered with mangled Limbs, and Bodies dead or dying; the ships sinking, burning, or blown into the Air; and the Quantity of Pain, Misery, and Destruction, the Crews yet alive were thus with so much Eagerness dealing round to one another; he turn'd angrily to his Guide, and said, "You blundering Blockhead, you are ignorant of your Business; you undertook to conduct me to the Earth, and you brought me into Hell!" "No, Sir," says the Guide, "I have made no mistake, this is really the Earth, and these are men. Devils never treat one another in this cruel manner; they have more Sense, and more of what Men (vainly) call Humanity."4

Except for recent studies by Professors A. Owen Aldridge and J.A. Leo Lemay, scholars have been inexplicably reluctant to consider Franklin's numerous psychological and philosophical forays into the

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Benjamin Franklin (Philadelphia, 1976), 77-122; "Benjamin Franklin, Universal Genius," in The Renaissance Man in the Eighteenth Century (Los Angeles, 1978), 1-44; and The Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 1722-1776: New Attributions and Reconsiderations (Newark, DE, 1986). Professor Lemay's generous encouragement of this study from its inception has been crucial.


darker side of human nature and into the role that Providence finally plays in the affairs of man. Yet in correspondence and news or editorial pieces Franklin frequently betrays himself as one who has discovered a blackness that goes beyond rehearsal of traditional (hence excusable) human foibles lurking beneath the veneer of human civility and who rejects as cant most orthodox assurances of providential constancy and benevolence regarding the affairs of man. Neglecting this accessible evidence, scholars have further neglected the question of the extent to which Franklin personally subscribed to a dark view of man or, by what seems a logical extension of this question, the extent to which Franklin's seeming optimism, which is, to be sure, the hallmark feature of his most popular writings, may not in fact have been provided intentionally as a necessary antidote to the darkness Franklin perceived in the nature and exhibited in the conduct of men all around him. Significantly, in the writings discussed below one finds not the postures of amusement, burlesque, bawdiness, or facetiousness typically associated with the satirical Franklin, but a posture, with accompanying literary tone, that deliberately ranges from bitter irony to outright pessimism and disgust with human nature. Significantly, too, these writings date from periods throughout Franklin's life, indicating that he did not come to his opinions as a result of either unreflective, pre-romantic youthful angst or world-weariness born of age. In all, Franklin's treatment of the dark side of human character and his own dark views of man elicit the most savage comments to be found in any of his writings.

Some of the most compelling evidence to support the view that Franklin not only perceived a dark side in man but also subscribed to a philosophy of pessimism grounded on his disgust with human nature and actions is found in his correspondence with Dr. John Fothergill and Joseph Priestley. As fellow men of science whose philosophical capacity he appreciated and whose biographical profiles were nearly as full of public activity as his own, Fothergill and Priestley served Franklin as confidants with whom he could share

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5 For others who have suggested the possibility of Franklin's belief in "the dark side," see Breitwieser, Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin; Fiering, "Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue," 199-223; Griffith, "Franklin's Sanity and the Man Behind the Masks," 123-38; and Zall, "A Portrait of the Autobiographer as an Old Artificer," 53-65.
his innermost feelings and with whom he could raise questions that most likely he was trying to find satisfactory answers to in his own life. Although one might be tempted to read in the correspondence the brand of humor associated with the humorous or satirical voices of Franklin's Silence Dogood or Busy-Body, the context for his remarks usually defies their misreading. For instance, one of Franklin's bleakest expressions of his view of man was occasioned in 1764 by Fothergill's apparent lament that his duties as physician left him no time to work and study in the botanical garden he had established at his estate in Essex. Writing on March 14, Franklin challenged Fothergill to consider the final value of his services, services which Franklin evidently considered costing Fothergill as dearly as his own uninterrupted services in the name of public and scientific interests:

> When do you intend to live? i.e. to enjoy Life. When will you retire to your Villa ... delight in Viewing the Operations of Nature ... assist her in her Works, get your ingenious Friends at times about you, make them happy with your Conversation, and enjoy theirs; or, if alone, amuse yourself with your Books and elegant Collections? To be hurried about perpetually from one sick Chamber to another, is not Living. Do you please yourself with the Fancy that you are doing Good? You are mistaken. Half the Lives you save are not worth saving, as being useless; and almost the other Half ought not to be sav’d, as being mischievous. Does your Conscience never hint to you the Impiety of being in constant Warfare against the Plans of Providence? Disease was intended as the Punishment of ... Vices; and the Example of that Punishment was intended to promote and strengthen ... Virtues. But here you step in officiously with your Art, disappoint those wise Intentions of Nature, and make Men safe in their Excesses. ... [Y]ou seem to me to be of just the same Service to Society as some favorite first Minister, who out of the great Benevolence of his Heart should procure Pardons for all Criminals that apply’d to him. Only think of the Consequences!

While the suggestion that the example of disease is a warning from Providence against excess in the ways of the flesh is in keeping with other Franklin expressions on the same subject, Franklin's outright charge that Fothergill is deluding himself if he thinks that he is doing good by his practice, his conviction that most lives saved by physicians

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are not worth saving, and his association of the sick with criminals seem definitely out of character for Franklin—or at least out of character for the Franklin we have inherited. Yet Franklin’s views here that most men are deservedly beyond redemption and that the efforts worthy men may make to save men from themselves are doomed inevitably to be frustrated are consistent with opinions he expressed privately and in print throughout his life. For instance, in the Pennsylvania Gazette for April 27, 1730, Franklin hazarded the opinion in a letter signed “Philoclerus” that “the Salvation of Men’s Souls,” despite the wise and necessary efforts of governments and religion to assure “the well-ordering and well-being of Society,” may not, in the final analysis, be “worth regarding.” A few years later in a philosophical dialogue, entitled “A Man of Sense,” which he prepared for presentation to the Junto, Franklin debated the sides of the Shaftesbury-Mandeville controversy over the issue of man’s selfishness and hypocrisy. He settled squarely on the Mandeville side. As Crito, Franklin’s Socratic innocent in the dialogue, comes to learn, men are by nature inclined to selfishness. Operating under the fashionable guise of “Sense,” men are hypocrits who typically behave no better than vicious beasts. While Crito believes, as Fothergill practiced, that “Virtue is really the true Interest of all Men,” Crito has to admit, as Fothergill apparently had not, that the best intentions of good men to raise their fellows to the practice of virtue will fail, largely because the mass of men will always take the easy way out. Crito states: “those who talk well of [virtue], do not put it in Practice. . . . [T]hey speak only by rote, retailing to us what they have pick’d out of . . . Books or Conversation. . . . [Virtue] having never enter’d or made any Impression on their Hearts, has therefore no Influence on the Conduct of their Lives.” Socrates sums up Crito’s new knowledge thus: despite the examples of virtuous words and deeds all around them, men typically prefer to remain “ignorant and
foolish." "Fool[s] . . . Dunce[s], and . . . Blockhead[s]," they do not, as Franklin later told Fothergill, deserve to be saved.8

Shocking though the terms might be, it is finally not too surprising that Franklin would question the worth of saving men's souls or that he would settle with those holding to the essential selfishness of man. In the 1730s he had little difficulty admitting to the merits of Hobbes's view of the natural state of man. Writing to James Logan, for example, he challenged Locke's optimistic views on the human condition, saying "Hobbes . . . [is] nearer the Truth than that [Not-ion] which makes the State of Nature a State of Love," but retreated from espousing a fully pessimistic Hobbesian view, adding "the Truth perhaps lies between both Extreams."9 That men will typically indulge their appetites before practicing virtue or entertaining serious thought is a position he held well into his late years, as evidenced by this anecdote preserved by John Adams. It seems that during a visit to Samuel and John Adams in 1775 Franklin decided to argue the theory that man is a rational creature:

"Man, a rational Creature"! said Franklin. "Come, Let Us suppose a rational Man. Strip him of all his Appetites, especially of his hunger and thirst. He is in his Chamber, engaged in making Experiments, or in pursuing some Problem. He is highly entertained. At this moment a Servant Knocks, "Sir dinner is on Table." "Dinner! Pox! Pough! But what have you for dinner?"' Ham and Chickens. "Ham"!

Even stripped of all his appetites, this supposed rational creature instinctively responds to the lure of his favorite food over the superior nourishment provided by the lively operations of his mind. Although in point of fact Adams related that Franklin concluded the vignette with this particular fellow deciding to "dine tomorrow," the tone of Franklin's reported conversation is that after exclaiming "Ham!" most would willingly "break the chain of . . . thoughts [and] go down and knaw a morsel of a damn'd Hogs Arse."10 Finally, Crito's depressing conviction in "A Man of Sense" that virtue (to which may be added knowledge in light of the foregoing anecdote) usually

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8 Papers, 2:17-19.
9 Papers, 2:185.
fails to make any lasting impression on the hearts of men and therefore provides no positive influence on the conduct of their lives is one of Franklin's life-long complaints. Though they may have many opportunities for virtuous action and an increase of knowledge placed before them, men instinctively elect to remain fools, dunces, and blockheads—at least in respect of their moral character and vision. In a letter to Joseph Priestley dated February 8, 1780, Franklin succinctly expressed his despair of man ever joining moral progress to the ample opportunities for advance represented by scientific progress:

The rapid Progress true Science now makes, occasions my regretting sometimes that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the Height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the Power of Man over Matter.... O that moral Science were in as fair a way of Improvement, that Men would cease to be Wolves to one another, that human Beings would at length learn what they now improperly call Humanity."

Franklin's desire that he and his fellows would learn to be humane and that a right brand of "Humanity" might characterize commonplace relations between men was continually frustrated by what he perceived as man's dark or fallen nature, a nature in which he freely admitted his share. His comments to Fothergill that most men will be found either useless or mischievous and his remark to Priestley that men are better practiced predators than humanists merely hint at the litany of complaints against man that he amassed over the years. Along with the Puritan fathers who conditioned the outlook of Boston during his youth, Franklin could not for long escape a conviction of man's corruption and inclination toward vice and evil. He might try in his own life to formulate plans for moral perfection, but as the evidence of Part Two of the Autobiography demonstrates, he had to admit failure in this too ambitious enterprise. Individuals like Franklin and Fothergill might devote themselves to service for the public good, but such services too were doomed inevitably to failure owing to man's tendency to excessive pride, self-love, self-

"Smyth, ed., Writings, 8:166."
deception, ignorance, physical appetite, hypocrisy, moral relativism, avarice, contentiousness, love of fashion, and animality.

The better Franklin understood his world, the more assured he became of the justice of his complaints against man. On many occasions he expressed his disdain for human nature and contempt for man's overpowering pride through the banter of unsuspecting personae such as Busy-Body, Alice Addertongue, and other satiric creations. J.A. Leo Lemay is quite right when he says of Polly Baker, for instance, that Franklin used such persons as representations of the masses and that their pronouncements on whatever matter happened to be at hand were extended justifications of his own bleak view of those they represent. In the case of Polly Baker, "[her] obtuse blindness to her real situation, her passionate conviction of the justice of her own position, her belief in her absurd and wishful logic, and especially, her supreme vanity—all characterize human nature, as Franklin saw it." Yet, as Franklin's correspondence also makes clear, he had no difficulty expressing that bleak view in his own voice. Possibly the most convincing evidence of his dark side appears in the letter he wrote to Priestley on June 7, 1782. As with other bits of Franklin correspondence often quoted selectively, the excerpt from that letter used above as the headnote to this section might be read as simply another example of Franklin's brash satire; however, placed in its original context, the excerpt along with the portion of the letter preceding it as quoted at length below can only be read as Franklin's venting of what, by 1782, was a lifetime's worth of disdain and contempt for man and his actions.

I should rejoice much, if I could once more recover the Leisure to search with you into the Works of Nature; I mean the inanimate, not the animate or moral part of them; the more I discover'd of the former, the more I admir'd them; the more I know of the latter, the more I am disgusted with them. Men I find to be a Sort of Beings very badly constructed, as they are generally more easily provok'd than reconcil'd, more disposed to do Mischief to each other than to make Reparation, much more easily deceiv'd than undeceiv'd, and having more Pride and even Pleasure in killing than in begetting one another; for without

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12 Lemay, "The Text, Rhetorical Strategies and Themes of 'The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,'" 112.
a Blush they assemble in 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, as being ashamed of a virtuous Action. A virtuous Action it would be, and a vicious one the killing of them, if the Species were really worth producing or preserving; but of this I . . . doubt.

I know you have no such Doubts, because, in your zeal for their welfare, you are taking a great deal of pains to save their Souls. Perhaps as you grow older, you may look upon this as a hopeless Project, or an idle Amusement, repent of having murdered in mephitic air so many honest, harmless mice, and wish that to prevent mischief, you had used Boys and Girls instead.13

Taken as a whole, Franklin’s letter to Priestley is a masterfully controlled, comprehensive late-in-life expression of pessimism. Whereas in much of his satirical, philosophical, or political writing Franklin typically relieves as well as underscores the seriousness of his subject by using light anecdote, playful over- or under-statement, or outright humor, here, with the equanimity of the “old courier-spirit” instructing the “young Angel” in the ways of the world, he employs the objective, measured prose of scientific discourse to voice, on the basis of experience, disgust with man’s degenerate moral capacity. His tone is unquestionably bitter, more savage and devastating than any otherwise found in his writings, and it takes on a jeremiadic character as man, whose moral sense was roughly equivalent to that of wolves a few years earlier, is characterized in the battle anecdote as now having surpassed even the devil’s taste for cruelty and insensitivity. Here is neither banter nor unsuspecting humor; instead, the moral outrage of one who has witnessed the numerous ways corrupt man has singlemindedly defied the purpose of his creation by defiling the natural powers of his mind and body by desecrating the planet on which he has been set is heard. In any revised biographical estimate of Franklin, his remarks to Priestley in 1782 will have to be cited as the ultimate expression of Franklin, “the quintessential pessimist.”

Franklin’s essential pessimism, if not always acknowledged by way of his signature, informs a number of his public writings. It is the

13 Smyth, ed., Writings, 8:451-52.
source of his complex remarks on original sin in, for instance, A Defense of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill's Observations just as much as it is the source of his extended statements against man's character and actions in the fable of "The Rats and the Cheese" and "An Apology for a Young Man in Gaol" (see Appendix, items A-C). Although Franklin's rejection of the Christian doctrine of original sin as "a Bugbear set up by Priests," "absurd in itself," and a terror-inducing principle to serve "the little selfish Ends of [its] Inventors and Propagators" is apparently absolute, his own position, that moral guilt (or moral virtue, for that matter) is "so personal a Thing" that the guilt associated with Adam's fall "cannot possibly in the Nature of Things be transferr'd from one Man to Myriads of others," is, finally, on the evidence of his own actions and writings, little more satisfactory than inherited Christian doctrine. Whether in the subtle figurative representation of human political and social conduct in "The Rats and the Cheese" or in the brutally grotesque characterization of human sexual appetite and man's taste for the lurid and sensational in "An Apology," Franklin is representing men acting according to their natural taste and temper, which is corrupt in consequence of Adam's fall. Adam, according to Franklin, set man's fall in motion; men individually and collectively perpetuate that fall, taking the guilt associated with their actions for themselves. While it may appear that Franklin is being somewhat existential in his conviction that each man makes his own fall so that guilt is his as a result of his personal intention while the severity of guilt is measured against the nature of the action he takes, the fact nonetheless remains that with or without Adam's part Franklin believed that men invariably follow the lure of inclination rather than of principle or good intention.

The damning factor for man, as Franklin admirably demonstrates in descriptions of his own conduct in the Autobiography, is that personal intention is self-serving and corrupt. Although Franklin soft-pedals his guilt under the guise of errata or endearing, hence excusable, self-interest, his descriptions and occasional rationalizations show the impossibility of man acting as other than falling or fallen creatures. For instance, recounting his first voyage from Boston in Part I of the Autobiography, Franklin details the events leading up to his remarkably easy rejection of vegetarianism, after having stuck for a time to "[his] Resolution of not eating animal Food." It seems that while they were becalmed off Block Island, his travel-mates began catching cod in
great number, which “smelt admirably well” in the frying pan. How long he had been a vegetarian is unclear; however, the appeal of freshly caught, fine-smelling cod proved irresistible. In a mere four-sentence Franklinesque balancing act “between Principle ['(T)he taking of ... Fish (is) a kind of unprovok'd Murder.'] and Inclination ['I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish.'],” inclination, assisted by rationalization, handily prevails: “I recollected, that when . . . Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their Stomachs: Then, thought I, if you eat one another, I don’t see why we mayn’t eat you. So I din’d upon Cod very heartily.”

Similarly, Franklin’s lengthy discussion of his conception and early practice of “the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” is riddled with expressions designed to excuse his eventual failure in the project. As several scholars have observed, the “moral Perfection” to which Franklin aspired was not a fixed and final state; instead, it was a fluid state in which, on my terms, inclination could be measured against and, as appropriate, checked by principle, and principle prevail. Yet from the outset an ironic tone permeates Franklin’s narrative, undermining the possibility of his ever achieving even a fluid state of “moral Perfection.” His failure as depicted in the narrative is a foregone conclusion, because the project was “a Task of more Difficulty than [he] had imagined,” or because “Inclination was sometimes too strong for Reason,” or because “being employ’d in Voyages and Business abroad with a Multiplicity of Affairs . . . interfered” with his contrivances to see the project through—and so forth. With the ease of one who transferred to the habits of fish responsibility for following his own inclinations, Franklin here transfers to others—those who, growing impatient at the time it takes to polish and hone an axe, conclude, “I think I like a speckled Axe best,” or those who, fearing the “extreme Nicety” of striving for moral perfection will be taken as “a kind of Foppery in Morals,” making them appear “ridiculous,” allow themselves the latitude of “a benevolent Man,” permitting “a few Faults in [themselves], to keep [their] Friends in Countenance”—any guilt associated with his failure. All that is not stated here is the ironic truism with which he

concluded the cod vignette, justifying in a characteristic light vein his inability to check inclination by the higher call of principle: “So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable Creature, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do.”

Franklin’s style—the use of metaphors such as “a speckled axe” for those who settle for moral imperfection and the development of an ironic, at times, conciliatory, tone—obscures his inability to be severe with himself in the Autobiography for the ways in which he acts according to the dictates of human inclination. However, he has no difficulty in being severe and in employing a harshly accusatory tone in descriptions of and judgments on comparable actions by his fellow man. The dark side he could not admit existed within himself he found repeatedly exercised in the characteristic actions of his contemporaries and in the values that informed those actions. In substance, “The Rats and the Cheese” and “An Apology” outline the broad spectrum of complaints Franklin levied against man. The tone of these works—understated venom in the first case, outright salaciousness in the second—functions both as an expression of Franklin’s attitude toward his immediate subject and as, in the example of Lemay’s reading of the function of Polly Baker, a characterization of the least praiseworthy aspects of human nature, and it typifies Franklin’s handling of such unflattering subjects. In the first piece human inclination, as illustrated through the self-interest, self-love, self-aggrandizement, expediency, avarice, equivocation, moral relativism, and gluttony of rats, who are themselves thinly disguised human types, is highlighted to demonstrate the literal and figurative degeneracy of the race, while in the second piece Franklin reworks the popular eighteenth-century gallows genre in a way that appeals to and represents the prurience of popular taste.

Neither “The Rats and the Cheese” nor “An Apology” is an unique statement in the Franklin canon; in fact, each shares an ethical and aesthetic kinship with well-known Franklin satires, parodies, and accusatory social and political writings such as “Advice to a Friend on Choosing a Mistress,” “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,” “An Edict by the King of Prussia,” and the epistolary essays of Silence

15 Ibid., 66, 73, 28.
Dogood and Busy-Body. Yet until these poems were formally documented as to source and Franklin’s probable authorship by Lemay in his *Canon*, they, along with several other largely unknown Franklin journalistic and editorial pieces documented by Lemay, were substantial missing links in any scholar’s search for the extremes to which Franklin articulated his dark views.\(^{16}\) In many cases, Franklin’s unsigned journalistic and editorial pieces are, like the poems discussed above, comprehensive statements that fully flesh out, rather than simply complement, his well-known but scattered expressions of disdain and contempt for man in the larger Franklin canon. Often the reader discovers in these pieces a melange of human vice and corruption wherein one particular vice, usually avarice, pride and intellectual conceit, or animality, is represented as the well-spring of others in fallen man.

For instance, hints of Franklin’s conviction that avarice is a motivation fundamental to human behavior abound in his writings, but comprehensive expressions of either its pervasiveness or its capacity to undermine man’s best intentions and lead him to yet more heinous vices do not. Avarice was a flaw Franklin noticed in his own character and hoped to check with training in virtues such as frugality ("Make no Expense but to do good to others or yourself.") and moderation ("Avoid Extremes."). In a letter to his mother dated April 12, 1750, he attributed son William’s “habit of Idleness” to his mistaken assumption of a hefty inheritance and described his measures to check Will’s youthful greed, inadvertently suggesting that he had not quite mastered frugality himself:

> He imagin’d his Father had got enough for him: But I have assur’d him that *I intend to spend what ... I have, my self; if it please God that I live long enough*: And as he by no means wants Sense, he can see by my going on, that I am like to be as good as my Word.\(^{17}\)

A few months later, on June 2, he agreed with William Strahan that “the Pursuit of Wealth to no End” was “the general Foible of Mankind” and wondered at the absurdity of people “ambitious of


\(^{17}\) *Papers*, 3:474-75 (emphasis mine).
what they call *dying worth* a great Sum." On November 5, 1756, he nearly exploded with resentment in a letter to Peter Collinson against those who turn profit on profit by commerce instead of directing some of their gain to the "Publick Good":

> I have some natural Dislike to Persons who so far Love Money, as to be unjust for its sake: I despise their Meanness. . . . I am . . . asham'd for them, when I see them differing with . . . People for Trifles, and instead of being ador'd, as they might be, like Demi Gods, become the Objects of universal Hatred and Contempt.\(^\text{19}\)

Finally, on June 10, 1771, Franklin succinctly characterized for Thomas Cushing what he took to be the real insidiousness of man's taste for money and the power it may bring: "The Love of Money is not a Thing of certain Measure, so as that it may be easily filled and satisfied. *Avarice is infinite.*"\(^\text{20}\)

None of these statements, even when they are collected together, adequately express Franklin's contempt for man (or for himself) as he succumbs to the temptations fostered by avarice or his alarm at the manifold implications of men following an avaricious course. Even the otherwise pithy wisdom of Poor Richard is inadequate on this account, for when he says in 1753, "He that is of Opinion Money will do every Thing, may well be suspected of doing every Thing for Money,"\(^\text{21}\) he fails to clarify the various levels of "every Thing" that money will supposedly do or that people will supposedly do for money. Yet a careful reading of "The Rats and the Cheese" supplies ready and unsettling answers to all queries. Although the reader may be initially puzzled by what Franklin estimates as man's greatest sin in the poem—self-love, moral relativism, expediency, and the like all seem to vie for supremacy as the principal motivating factor in the actions of the rats/men—by the concluding lines, when Franklin's knowledgeable rat, "not quite so blind . . . as Franklin's Humankind," intrudes, it is apparent that avarice is the basic motivation behind the political intrigue and duplicitous social interaction de-

\(^{18}\) *Papers,* 3:479.  
\(^{19}\) *Papers,* 7:14.  
\(^{20}\) *Papers,* 18:124.  
\(^{21}\) *Papers,* 4:405.
scribed in the poem: "Your Politics are all a Farce; / And your fine Virtues but mine A---: / All your Contentions are but these, / Whose Art shall best secure the CHEESE." And here avarice serves as the essential human vice out of which others grow: the "every Thing" rats (and men) will do for cheese (money) encompasses their submission to the full range of vices or inclinations outlined above.

Similarly, in a series of companion pieces on the lying of shopkeepers published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on November 19 and December 3, 1730, Franklin restated his case against avarice, employing a variety of human personae instead of rats. It may be easy, after all, for Franklin's audience to distance itself from the substance of his accusations when the perpetrators are rats and the form is fable; it is much more difficult to ignore the applicability of his remarks when the speakers are fellow men and women of more-or-less common intellect whose statements are sententious echoes of the wisdom one hears on the street or in the marketplace. In the first piece, published on November 19, Franklin pits the biblical, classical, and aphoristic wisdom of an apparently decent man against the self-deluding and crass wisdom of shopkeepers in order to satirize the lack of integrity in and shortsightedness of the latter. The contest is set in the opening lines:

A Friend of mine was the other Day cheapening [that is, haggling over] some Trifles at a Shopkeepers, and after a few Words, they agreed on a Price; at the lapping up this Purchase, the Mistress of the Shop told him, People were grown very hard, for she actually lost by every thing she sold: How then is it possible, replied my Friend, that you can keep on your Business? Indeed, Sir, answer'd she, I must of Necessity shut my Doors, had I not a very great Trade. The Reason, said my Friend, with a Sneer, is admirable.

There are a great many Retailers, who falsely imagine that being Historical (the modern Phrase for Lying) is much for their Advantage; and some of them have a Saying, That 'tis a Pity Lying is a Sin, it is so useful in Trade. . . .

From the start, the power of the piece is that there can be no meeting of minds between the sensible narrator and the targeted shopkeepers, against whom the narrator shares his friend's sneer and extends it for several paragraphs. Shopkeepers have only one defense to offer for their avariciousness and lying: the necessity of turning a profit at any cost, particularly as "People [have] grown very hard." The narrator,
however, has numerous vantages from which to sneer at and attack his fallen fellows. He notes, for example, that some who would lie to and cheat their customers for a profit “have become Bankrupts,” while those who dealt with their customers on the basis of “Truth, Diligence and Probity” found “Character raise[d] a Credit which supplie[d] the Want of Fortune” and “fair Dealing . . . [brought] them Custom.” The financial failure of cheating and lying shopkeepers, he further observes, may actually be the least price they pay for their misdeeds. Just as the rats compound their guilt by heaping vice upon vice in order to satisfy their greed, morally bankrupt shopkeepers, who “hope to make [their] Fortune by [their] Perjury,” will eventually discover they have “pawn[ed] their Salvation to raise their Price.” Finally, the narrator elaborates the singular practical advantage of dealing honestly in business: it frees one from the fear of contradicting oneself in the proverbial web of deceit, fear of the shame and derision that invariably attend discovery, and, ultimately, “fear of being taken with [one’s] own Words.”

Because the narrator is less the moral superior of shopkeepers than he is a walking compendium of Franklinesque practicality, one wonders whether Franklin may not have inadvertently burlesqued himself in the editorial, particularly in light of the ultimate fear that man rescues himself from when dealing honestly. The possibility definitely exists. Nevertheless, Franklin reaffirmed the context in which he wished to see the editorial read when on December 3 he published two epistolary companions to it in the Gazette. As they write, the authors of the letters, familiar satiric types in the Franklin canon, prove the validity of accusations against the character of shopkeepers voiced by the editorial’s sensible narrator. In the first letter, Betty Diligent, a shopkeeper, tries to justify the rationale typically employed by her colleagues for their lying and cheating. As she does so, she exhibits unintended healthy portions of paranoia (“I suppose [I] am the Person at whom some Reflections are aimed in one of your late Papers.”), self-delusion (“Shopkeepers are . . . accus’d of Lying . . . without the least Notice being taken of the general Lying practic’d by Customers.”), and moral relativism (“[T]hey [that is, customers] will tell a hundred Lies to undervalue our Goods, and make our Demands appear extravagant: So . . . the Blame of all the Lying properly belongs to the Customers . . . because if the Shopkeepers strain the Truth a little now and then, they are forc’d to do it in
their own Defence"). In the second letter, Mercator, a wholesaler, intends to impugn further the character of shopkeepers by arguing that the censure they deserve for "lying ... in selling their Goods" insufficiently addresses the enormity of their greed. Their lying and cheating in selling tells "just one half the story," he writes; "I believe they think Lying full as convenient and beneficial in buying their Goods as selling them." Ironically, in the process of accusing shopkeepers Mercator forgets that he is one too; without intending it, he extends the editorial's sneer motif to cover all who sell and, since he is selling to some who buy in order to sell again, all who buy.

J.A. Leo Lemay has rightly characterized these letters—to which I would add the editorial of November 19—as Franklin's expression of an "incredibly pessimistic and black worldview." Between the three pieces accusations finally fly against everyone: customers, shopkeepers, and wholesalers all lie, cheat, and connive in order to satisfy the essentially avaricious inclinations of their nature. As in the lesson of "The Rats and the Cheese," these pieces establish that there is really no level to which men will not fall in order to appease their greed, and they demonstrate the pattern frequently exhibited in Franklin's writing, showing how one vice easily leads to others.

Franklin's pessimism and the pattern typifying the persistent fall and corruption of man is probably nowhere more apparent than in his writings in which human pride and intellectual conceit are at issue. Pride and intellectual conceit are pervasive in the character and inform the actions of all of his satiric personae and exhibit themselves most frequently in the host of vices they engender—especially self-love and self-aggrandizement, rationalization which is thinly disguised moral relativism, self-delusion, contentiousness, and opinionatedness. More than avarice and, possibly, animality, pride and intellectual conceit are inclinations Franklin believed fundamental to human nature, making them thereby difficult, if not impossible on his own example, to subdue. In the Autobiography, he acknowledges both as "natural Inclinations[s]" as he details the circumstances under which "Humility" was added to his list of virtues:

My List of Virtues contain'd at first but twelve: But a Quaker Friend

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22 Lemay, Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 53.
having kindly inform'd me that I was generally thought proud; that my Pride show'd itself frequently in Conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any Point, but was overbearing and rather insolent; of which he convinc'd me by mentioning several Instances; I determined endeavouring to cure myself if I could of this Vice or Folly among the rest, and I added Humility to my List, giving an extensive Meaning to the Word. I cannot boast of much Success in acquiring the Reality of this Virtue; but I had a good deal with regard to the Appearance of it.... 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, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive. . . . [E]ven if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility.”

Franklin's efforts to curb pride and intellectual conceit met with mixed results in practice. By his own admission, he could boast of success only in the appearance of practicing humility, not in the reality of having acquired a humble frame of mind. Yet in the character and actions of satiric personae such as Polly Baker, Betty Diligent, Busy-Body, and Silence Dogood he demonstrated his belief that most people cannot point even to that level of success. As these figures try to justify themselves, for instance, they reveal in self-deluding or temporizing logic, in self-flattery or in false modesty, and in contentiousness or in holding unreflectively to self-serving opinions the tell-tale signs of the principal "Vice or Folly" from which these lesser inclinations spring. What makes these figures powerful is their universality; what makes them important indices to Franklin's general estimate of man is the universality of the corrupt values out of which they speak and act; and what, paradoxically, most disturbs Franklin as he writes about them is that as their actions confirm his pessimism, their universal behavior illustrates his own fallen nature.

Franklin anticipated the power of his personae and the predicament in which they would place their creator when he wrote the following in *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity* in 1725:

Mankind naturally and generally love to be flatter'd: Whatever soothes our Pride, and tends to exalt our Species above the rest of Creation, we are pleas'd with and easily believe, when ungrateful Truths shall

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22 *Autobiography*, 75-76.
be with the utmost Indignation rejected. . . . But, (to use a Piece of common Sense) our Geese are but Geese tho' we may think 'em Swans; and Truth will be Truth tho' it sometimes prove mortifying and distasteful.²⁴

Though he diminished the “mortifying and distasteful” aspects of the truth about himself in the Autobiography, Franklin consistently expressed disdain and contempt at the failure of others to practice humility, even with a narrow meaning attached. For instance, in the example of men holding obstinately to their opinions without the least thought to a periodic test or challenge he documented a fundamental human inclination that stemmed from man’s failure to check pride and intellectual conceit through humility. Endemic within the race, this inclination is exhibited in the character of all the above-mentioned personae and its presence occasions some of Franklin’s bleakest observations. Addressing the inclination in a Pennsylvania Gazette editorial published on March 27, 1735, Veridicus, an unusually sympathetic Franklin persona, attempts to disabuse man of this “darling Prejudice.” Veridicus states, “a pertinacious Obstinacy in Opinion, and confident [intellectual] Self-Sufficiency, is possibly one of the greatest Vices, as well as Weaknesses, the human Mind is capable of.” Man, he notes, easily and naturally holds fast to his pet opinions and views himself as self-sufficient due to his “Ignorance in the Nature of Things.” People instinctively take and hold onto opinions in the heat of a moment, never subjecting those opinions to the scrutiny of “cool impartial Thoughts”; frequently, they latch onto “Prevailing Opinions” which, despite their currency and fashionableness, are nothing more than “prevailing Falsehoods.” Typically, people test opinions only by their appeal to self-interest or immediate self-gratification, “falling in with a Party” that seems to guarantee their interest, without considering the undisclosed positions such affiliation also involves. Lemay admires Veridicus’s command of human psychology.²⁵ But the sheer weight of example Veridicus uses to document the pervasiveness and insidiousness of this vice shows not only that he understands man very well, but also that he understands

²⁴ Papers, 1:71.
²⁵ Lemay, Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 88-90.
his effort to lead man to the truth will inevitably be frustrated. Because most men prize "an Opinion of [their] Infallibility," he knows "they can never grow wiser than they already are"; because "man can hardly forbear wishing those Things to be true and right, which he apprehends would be for his Conveniency to find so," Veridicus, as with Franklin at the conclusion of the cod vignette, knows that man will always reject "with the utmost Indignation" truths that lack the appeal of self-interest or self-gratification.

Franklin's treatment of censure or backbiting as an example of fundamental human meanness and pettiness provides an interesting parallel to his treatment of man's "pertinacious Obstinacy in Opinion." Both vices have pride and intellectual conceit as their source, but Franklin saw the disposition of man to routinely depreciate others in order to elevate himself as the more pernicious vice. He assigned four virtues to check it in his own conduct: silence ("Speak not but what may benefit others or your self."); sincerity ("Use no hurtful Deceit. Think innocently and justly; and, if you speak[,] speak accordingly."); justice ("Wrong none, by doing Injuries or omitting the Benefits that are your Duty."); and moderation ("Forbear resenting Injuries so much as you think they deserve."). Yet for Franklin, the disposition to censure one's fellows was an inclination so fundamental to human nature that except for satirizing it when he saw it, he had no devices at hand to check it in the conduct of others. Not only does the inclination appeal to self-interest and provide immediate gratification, but also no arguments seem adequate to dissuade man from universally subscribing to the practice. In "Busy-Body Number 1," Franklin satirized the ease with which man engages in censure, divulging in his characterization of that ease, I believe, his despair of ever suppressing the practice. Acting out of "Zeal for the Publick Good," Busy-Body proposes taking on the office of "Censor Morum," adding.

I am sensible I have, in this Particular, undertaken a very unthankful office, and expect little besides my Labour for my Pains. Nay 'tis probable I may displease a great Number ... who will not very well like to pay 10s. a Year for being told of their Faults. But as most People

26 Autobiography, 67.
delight in Censure when they themselves are not the Objects of it, if any are offended at my publicly exposing their private Vices, I promise they shall have the Satisfaction, in a very little Time, of seeing their good Friends and Neighbours in the same Circumstances.27

"Fondness for ourselves," Franklin wrote to Jared Eliot on September 12, 1751, is the "general Source of Censure and Backbiting"; "Love of Praise . . . reigns more or less in every Heart," so that, he told Eliot, "condemning the Conduct of another in any particular, amounts to . . . saying, I am so honest, or wise, or good or prudent, that I could not do or approve of such an Action."28 Between the spurious logic out of which Busy-Body operates and the rational logic through which Franklin details the source of censure and backbiting for Eliot there really is no ground on which to effect a compromise action against such practices; there is only satire, which, when no other arguments can stand, is the ultimate expression of pessimism.

Franklin's bleak concession to the pervasiveness and indestructibility of censure and backbiting is probably no better stated than in a pair of companion essays he wrote for the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1732. The first essay, only recently established as Franklin's by Lemay, appeared on September 7.29 In it Franklin's narrator takes Busy-Body's logic seriously and pushes it to the extreme, arguing for the good services censure and backbiting provide society: they are "frequently the Means of preventing powerful, politic . . . Men from growing too popular"; they assist man's "otherwise weak Resolutions of living virtuously," particularly as he fears discovery; they bring "a Man to the Knowledge of himself" that his friends may be too timid to acquaint him with; and they help "exceedingly to a thorough Knowledge of Mankind," for only in the elaboration of its faults is mankind truly known. The second essay, long known to have been by Franklin, appeared on September 12, over the signature of Alice Addertongue. Aptly named, Alice is Franklin's most masterful acknowledgment of the thorough corruption and fall of man. More than Polly Baker and Busy-Body, she is the mistress of self-delusion, arrogance, ignorance, pettiness, deceit, and sheer spite. To his defense, the narrator of the first essay at least attempts to operate

27 Papers, 1:114.
28 Papers, 4:194-95.
29 Lemay, Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 72-74.
out of some sort of logic; Alice, on the other hand, takes perverse
delight in defying sensible readers to find any logic at all informing
her arguments. Speaking to the value of censure and backbiting, she
states, “Scandal, like other Virtues, is in part its own Reward, as it
gives us the Satisfaction of making our selves appear better than
others, or others no better than our selves.” She labels those who
would censure her as a gossip “Ideot Mock-Moralists,” claiming her
discovery and dissemination of scandal is a rare “Art” that has brought
her many returns, there being such a “Stock of Defamation” always
“naturally flowing” in society. She makes no apologies for conniving
her way into people’s confidence, for, she tells the reader, “If you
know any thing of Humane Nature,” you know that the appearance
of confidentiality and sincerity is the easiest means to discover “all
[of a person’s] Failings, past, present, and to come.” And she is
pleased to say that by “Industry and Application”—two uncomfort-
ably familiar Franklin virtues—she has made herself “the Center
of all the Scandal in the Province,” “there [being] little stirring but
I hear of it.” Yet perhaps the most unsettling feature of Alice’s
extensive remarks is the confidence with which she expresses the
naturalness and justice of her activities. Indeed, it is in Alice’s absolute
conviction of the lightness of her calling and the fairness of her
methods that Franklin conveys his despair of man’s ever rising above
affection for discovering the scandalous and unseemly in others:

'Tis a Principle with me [Alice proclaims], that none ought to have a
greater Share of Reputation than they really deserve; if they have, 'tis
an Imposition upon the Publick: I know it is every one’s Interest, and
therefore believe they endeavour, to conceal all their Vices and Follies;
and I hold, that those People are extraordinary foolish or careless who
suffer a Fourth of their Failings to come to publick Knowledge: Taking
then the common Prudence and Impudence of Mankind in a Lump,
I suppose none suffer above one Fifth to be discovered: Therefore when
I hear of any Person’s Misdoing, I think I keep within Bounds if in
relating it I only make it three times worse than it is; and I reserve to
my self the Privilege of charging them with one Fault in four, which,
for aught I know, they may be entirely innocent of. You see there are
but few so careful of doing Justice as my self... In a general way,
the worst that is said of us is only half what might be said, if all our
Faults were seen.30

30 Papers, 1:244-48.
Finally, despite his desire to instill in man an appreciation of the power of disinterested good will toward one's fellows and the utility of public service as means to promote social harmony and communal progress, Franklin undoubtedly wondered at the reasonableness of his purpose each time he came across the plentiful evidence of man's essential animality. As printer and publisher he had ready access to what might be called "man at his worst"; accounts of murder, rape, robbery, counterfeiting, arson, piracy, and perjury, for instance, appeared in all colonial newspapers and may have provided very early sources for Franklin's long-held belief, as expressed in the letters to Fothergill and Priestley cited above, that man had not progressed very far in the evolutionary scheme. Franklin's characterizations of man as predator and devil, even as gluttonous rat, underscore his conviction that man is more of a beast than a reasonable creature. Even in his characterizations of individuals such as Polly Baker, Betty Diligent, and Alice Addertongue, whom Franklin used to develop other issues, he detailed man's animality through illustrations of their gross sexuality, greed, brute ignorance, and psychologically abusive conduct toward others.

Although Franklin might have thought avarice and pride could be checked by a few of the virtues contained in his list of thirteen, he believed animality could be checked only by practice in all thirteen. As both a satire on man's base sexual inclination and a representation of conduct that appeals to the lowest level of popular taste, "An Apology" expresses his despair of ever completely suppressing brute inclinations in himself or others; no one, finally, could ever perfect practice in all thirteen virtues. To the extent that "An Apology" is satire, it is significant to note the absence of Franklin's characteristic humor in the piece. Humor, as such, appears only in the title, while in the text snide allusions to bestiality, homosexuality, and the rape of virgins elaborated in the spectacle of insatiable, brutal sexuality and grotesque characterizations of the principals involved in the action convey Franklin's disgust with all who would participate in, take an interest in, or sit in judgment on this particularly unnatural crime. His tone here is filled with anger and contempt equalled, perhaps, only by the satirist's tone underlying Alice Addertongue's and Polly Baker's self-justifications or in the measured prose Franklin employed when reporting on real crimes.

In an important example of the latter recently documented by
Franklin reported on the trial and public humiliation of a man and his wife "for the Murder of a Daughter which he had by a former Wife ... by turning her out of Doors, and thereby exposing her to such Hardships, as afterwards produced grievous Sickness and Lameness." Franklin's account, which appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on October 24, 1734, is grim. It seems that after their initial abuse of the girl the parents, "instead of supplying her with Necessaries and due Attendance . . . treated her with the utmost Cruelty and Barbarity[,] suffering her to lie and rot in her Nastiness [and offering her only] her own Excrements to eat." This, Franklin averred, was a case of "hitherto unheard of Barbarity." His shock was genuine; here was an episode from life, as opposed to the satire of "An Apology," that offered him a rare glimpse of the actual extreme to which man is apt to fall. In effect, even if the ample evidence of man's fall reported in various genre throughout his life did not exist, this episode alone would have been sufficient to confirm him in pessimism, doubt, and despair. With remarkable poignancy Franklin articulates the point himself when, in his liberal paraphrase of the judge's speech at sentencing, he states that these individuals "not only acted contrary to the particular Laws of all Nations, but had even broken the Universal Law of Nature"; except for them and the race they represent, "there are no Creatures known, how savage, wild, and fierce soever, that have not implanted in them a natural Love and Care of their tender Offspring."

The evidence presented in this essay for Franklin "the pessimist," contemptuous of man's pride and of the base inclinations fundamental to human nature, is by no means exhaustive. To it can be added bits and pieces of Franklin correspondence and newspaper writing such as those presented in the Appendix (items D–F), which, when read against just the possibility that he harbored a dark side, take on meanings quite different from those we would normally apply given our popular, inherited readings of his life and thought. In light of the foregoing discussion one may justly wonder, for instance, whether

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31 Lemay, *Canon of Benjamin Franklin*, 87-88.
Franklin's 1764 letter to Jane Mecom (Appendix, item D) is not more a conscious restatement of his long-held prejudice that "sweet and amiable" persons can never be happy in this world ("She is doubtless happy: which none of us are while in this Life" [emphasis mine].) than an expression of fraternal consolation. Similarly, one may wonder whether the barely disguised anger and contempt Franklin holds for a Providence that would allow the untimely demise of "good and wise Designs" (Appendix, item E) is a temporary outburst occasioned by context or the expression of a persistent conviction that the constancy of providential benevolence in the affairs of man is a sham belief, necessitated by man's desire to survive in a world marked by undeserved pain and suffering and unmitigated violence perpetrated against individuals by fellow man. Finally, one may wonder too whether in a letter such as the one signed "S.M." (Appendix, item F) Franklin is not using parody as a means to disguise the central aesthetic and ethical conflict in his own life. On the one hand, when "S.M." states "I do not love to see the dark Side of Things... The World is a very good World, and if we behave our selves well, we shall doubtless do very well in it," he echoes many of Poor Richard's positive sentiments and anticipates the positive and practical wisdom of Franklin's philosophy in the Autobiography. Seen in this context, "S.M." is restating the case for the advantages of a philosophy of deliberate optimism, which scholars have always persuasively attributed to Franklin. On the other hand, as Franklin and "S.M." know, not loving to see "the dark Side of Things" is not equivalent to saying "the dark Side of Things" does not exist. In "Pleasures sprinkled with bitterness," "Gingerbread... spotted with Flyshits," and one's "past vanish'd like a dream," Franklin may well be elaborating the implications of "the dark Side of Things" he discovered in his own inclination and conduct as well as in those of his fellows.
A: From Franklin's defense of Mr. Hemphill:

"Our lost and undone State by Nature, [original sin] as it is commonly call'd, proceeding undoubtedly from the Imputation of old Father Adam's first Guilt... I look upon this Opinion every whit as ridiculous as that of Imputed Righteousness. 'Tis a Notion invented, a Bugbear set up by Priests... to fright and scare an unthinking Populace out of their Senses, and inspire them with Terror, to answer the little selfish Ends of the Inventors and Propagators. 'Tis absurd in itself, and therefore cannot be father'd upon the Christian Religion as deliver'd in the Gospel. Moral Guilt is so personal a Thing, that it cannot possibly in the Nature of Things be transferr'd from one Man to Myriads of others, that were no way accessory to it. And to suppose a Man liable to Punishment upon account of the Guilt of another, is unreasonable; and actually to punish him for it, is unjust and cruel.

(A Defence of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill's Observations [1735], in Papers, 2:1214.)

B: "The RATS and the CHEESE; a FABLE"

If Bees a Government maintain,
Why may not Rats, of stronger Brain
And greater Power, as well be thought
By Machiavillian Axioms taught?
And so they are; for thus of late
It happened in the Rats free State:

Their Prince (his Subjects more to please)
Had got a mighty Cheshire Cheese,
In which his Ministers of State,
Might live in Plenty and grow Great.

A powerful Party straight combin'd,
And their united Forces join'd,
To bring their Measures into play
For none so loyal were as they;

For Appendix items B, C, E, and F, see Lemay, Canon of Benjamin Franklin, 46-47, 106-109, 84-86.
And none such Patriots to support,
As well the Country as the Court.
No sooner were those Dons admitted,
But (all those wondrous Virtues quitted)
Regardless of their Prince, and those
They artfully led by the Nose;
They all the speediest Means devise
To raise themselves and Families.

Another Party well-observing
These pamper’d were, while they were starving;
Their Ministry brought in Disgrace,
Expell’d them, and supply’d their Place:
Those on just Principles were known,
The true Supporters of the Throne;
They’d (marry would they) freely dye,
But being well fix’d in their Station,
Regardless of their Prince or Nation
Just like the others, all their Skill
Was how they might their Paunches fill.

On this, a Rat not quite so blind
In State Intrigues as Humankind,
But of more Honour, thus reply’d;
Confound ye all on either Side;
Your Politicks are all a Farce;
And your fine Virtues but mine A--:
All your Contentions are but these,
Whose Art shall best secure the CHEESE.

(Pennsylvania Gazette, September 24, 1730.)

C: “An Apology for the young Man in Gaol, and in Shackles,
for ravishing an old Woman of 85 at Whitemarsh
who had only one Eye, and that a red one.”

Unhappy Youth, that could not longer stay
Till by old Age thy Choice had dy’d away;
A few Days more had given to thy Arms,
Free from the Laws, her aged Lump of Charms,
Which, tho’ defunct, might feel not less alive
Than we imagine Maids of Eighty-five;
Or hadst thou staid till t’other Eye was gone,
Thou mightst have lov’d and jogg’d securely on.
Yet may thy Council urge this prudent Plea,
That by one Crime, thou hast avoided three;
For had a Mare or Sow attack’d thy Love,
No human Form to save thy Life would move;
Or had thy Lust been offer’d to a Male,
All Vindications would and ought to fail;
Or hadst thou sought a blooming Virgin’s Rape,
Thou shouldst not from the Penalty escape:
But when the Object is long past her Flow’r,
And brings no County-Charge, and wants no Dow’r;
Who, slighted all her Life, would fain be ravish’d
Thou shouldst be pity’d for thy Love so lavish’d.
(American Weekly Mercury, September 15, 1743.)

D: Franklin letter to his sister:

We all condole with you most sincerely on the Death of your Daughter.
She always appear’d to me of a sweet and amiable Temper, and to have
many other good Qualities that must make the Loss of her more grievous
for . . . you to bear. Our only Comfort under such Afflictions is . . .
[that] She is doubtless happy: which none of us are while in this Life.
(Franklin to Jane Mecom, on July 10, 1764, Papers, 11:253.)

E: Unsigned Franklin editorial on the death of innocent children:

[When] we reflect on the vast Numbers of Infants, that just struggle
into Life, then weep and die, and at the same time consider, that it can
be in no wise consistent with the Justice and Wisdom of an infinite
Being, to create to no end, we may very reasonably conclude, that those
animated Machines, those Men in miniature, who know no Difference
between Good and Evil, who are incapable of any good Offices towards
their Fellow-Creatures, or of serving their Maker, were made for good
and wise Designs and Purposes, which Purposes, and Designs transcend
all the Limits of our Ideas and all our present Capacities to conceive.
Should an able and expert Artificer employ all his Time and his Skill on
contriving and framing an exquisite Piece of Clock-work, which, when
he had brought it to the utmost Perfection Wit and Art were capable of,
and just set it a-going, he should suddenly dash it to pieces; would not
every wise Man naturally infer, that his intense Application had dis-
turb’d his Brain and impair’d his Reason?
(Unsigned Franklin editorial in the
Pennsylvania Gazette, June 20, 1734.)
F: Franklin letter on the limitations of melancholic religious meditation:

I do not love to see the dark Side of Things; and besides, I do not think [pessimistic] Reflections upon Life altogether just. The World is a very good World, and if we behave our selves well, we shall doubtless do very well in it. I never thought even Job in the right, when he repin’d that the Days of a Man are few and full of Trouble; for certainly both these Things cannot be together just Causes of Complaint; if our Days are full of Trouble, the fewer of ’em the better. . . . With very little Variation . . . elegant Expressions [such as Job’s complaint] . . . serve for a Child who laments that he cannot eat his Cake and have his Cake. [For instance,]

All the few days we live are full of Vanity, and our choicest Pleasures sprinkled with bitterness:

All the few Cakes we have are puffed up with Yeast; and the nicest Gingerbread is spotted with Flyshits!

The time that’s past is vanish’d like a dream; and that which is to come is not yet at all:

The Cakes that we have eaten are no more to be seen; and those which are to come are not yet baked.

The present we are in stays but for a moment, and then flies away and returns no more:

The present Mouthful is chewed but a little while, and then is swallowed down, and comes up no more. . . .

(Franklin letter, signed “S.M.,” in the Pennsylvania Gazette, August 8, 1734.)

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