



On the Origins and Intention of Benjamin Franklin's "On the Providence of God in the Government of the World"

PHILOSOPHERS IN THE SEVENTEENTH and eighteenth centuries used the phrase "government of the world" to discuss matters of physics, ethics, theology, and politics.¹ In physics, the phrase referred to the order of the universe: the essence of matter, and whether it moved chaotically or by discernible laws. The order of physical nature had ethical implications—whether or not human beings possessed free will, and if they did, whether or not they could know the effects of, and be account-

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¹ Robert Boyle, "A Free Inquiry into the Vulgar Notion of Nature," in *The Philosophical Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle, Esq; Abridged, Methodized, and Disposed under the General Heads of Physics, Statics, Pneumatics, Natural-History, Chymistry, and Medicine*, ed. Peter Shaw, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (London, 1738), 2:106–8; Sir Francis Bacon, *A Specimen of the Persian Magic, &c.*, in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon . . . Methodized and made English from the Originals*, ed. Peter Shaw, 3 vols. (London, 1733), 2:5: "For there is great affinity between the *Rules of Nature*, and the *true Rules of Policy*; the one being no more than an *Order in the Government of the World*, and the other an *Order in the Government of a State*"; Pierre Bayle, "Epicurus," *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr Peter Bayle . . .*, trans. P. Des Maizeaux, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (London, 1734–38), 2:786nS, 790nT; William Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature Delineated*, 2nd ed. (London, 1725), 94–95.

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able for, their actions. Natural philosophers and theologians provided conflicting answers to these questions. Christian theologians such as Samuel Clarke argued that God was “a *Supra-Mundane Intelligence*”—existing outside of, and therefore not bound by, the mechanistic realm of matter—that providently suspended and intervened in the laws of nature to issue revelatory dictates and to justly govern the world. These divines debated deists such as Lord Shaftesbury, who argued that God was nature itself, subsisting by its own self-governing laws that were accessible to human reason. The deists, in turn, debated the skeptics, such as Bernard Mandeville, who questioned not just the existence of a creator but whether there was any order to nature at all. The divines called deists undercover atheists, and the deists called the skeptics atheists.² Philosophers’ ideas about God’s government of the world also shaped their political views regarding what kind of laws humans should make to govern themselves. As a citizen of the Republic of Letters, the young Benjamin Franklin enthusiastically read all of these thinkers, and he participated in and contributed to the great philosophic and political debates of his age.

In 1730, Franklin wrote “On the Providence of God in the Government of the World” and presented it to his companions in the Junto, a social and philosophic society for middle-class artisans.³ As its title suggests, the twin themes of his essay are providence and politics. In this work, Franklin claims to prove both that there is a God of infinite attributes who created the universe and that the fact that men have always prayed proves that this God intervenes in his perfect, preordained order to reward virtue and punish vice. Consequently, “On the Providence of God” has served as a rallying cry among nonacademics for Franklin’s belief in God’s providence; meanwhile, among scholars, the essay has been largely either misinterpreted as Franklin’s leap of faith or overlooked as

² Samuel Clarke, *A Collection of Papers, Which passed between the late Learned Mr. Leibnitz, and Dr. Clarke, In the Years 1715 and 1716* (London, 1717), 15, 375; Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Douglas den Uyl, 3 vols. (Indianapolis, 2001), 2:6.

³ Benjamin Franklin, “On the Providence of God in the Government of the World,” [1732], in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (hereafter *PBF*), ed. Leonard Labaree et al., 40 vols. to date (New Haven, CT, 1959–), 1:264–69, also <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=264a>. This essay is quoted extensively throughout this article. This citation serves for all such references. For the date of the essay, see A. O. Aldridge’s review, “Papers of Benjamin Franklin,” *American Literature* 32 (1960): 208–9.

unimportant to his political philosophy. After placing Franklin's essay in the context of his biography, this article reviews the current scholarship on it and then makes two original claims. First, the origin of Franklin's essay is Pierre Bayle's article "Epicurus."⁴ Recognizing Franklin's source not only helps us understand Franklin's own argument but also shows that Franklin's concision in "On the Providence of God" masks a more complex, ironic argument. The second claim, demonstrated through a new interpretation of the essay, is that, far from being of no importance to Franklin's thought, this argument forms the essential foundation of Franklin's entrance into political life.

Franklin's Essays on Providence

As a young man, Benjamin Franklin was inclined to metaphysical wrangling. He excelled in exposing the inconsistencies of his interlocutors, and he found great pleasure in embarrassing the religious authorities and moralistic citizens of Boston. At eighteen, he travelled to London, the center of the British Empire, to seek out his fortune as a printer. While working at Palmer's, a famous printing house, he published his first metaphysical pamphlet, a burlesque of metaphysics entitled *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (1725). Beginning with a priori propositions of the existence of an "all-wise, all-good, all powerful" God that created and preordained the universe, the *Dissertation* claims to prove that the "Things and Actions to which we give the Name of *Evil*," such as "*Pain, Sickness, Want, Theft, Murder, &c.* . . . are not in reality *Evils*," but goods.⁵ Because human choices are determined by divine providence, virtue and vice logically cannot exist; "consequently *all is right*."⁶ Although Franklin claims to demonstrate how God is just to his creatures, his ironic conclusion is that justice—the proof of God's perfection—does not exist. Rather, Franklin argues, all creatures are self-serving; thus virtue, defined as perfect altruism, is both nonexistent and unnecessary in human affairs. Franklin borrowed this

⁴ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:774–92.

⁵ Franklin, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (London, 1725), in *PBF*, 1:59–60, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=057a>.

⁶ Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan, Nov. 9, 1779, in *ibid.*, 31:59, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=31&page=057a>.

argument against virtue from Bernard Mandeville, his London drinking companion.⁷ Like Mandeville, Franklin meant to promote philosophic relativism—to suggest that all philosophic inquiries reveal only the radically subjective hope for right, which does not exist. After men concede that moral virtue is impossible, they can peacefully agree to end quarreling over it and instead befriend their private vices in a commercial society. The *Dissertation*, therefore, has a political objective.

But Franklin found that this view was not very useful, to himself or others, and it led those who he thought were his friends to harm him without compunction. He lost his money, his friends, and his sense of purpose, and his experiences in England changed the way that he viewed the world. On his long voyage home, Franklin reflected upon his aspirations in life and reconsidered his position on human virtue. His simplistic scheme in the *Dissertation* had equated virtue with altruism, thus failing to account for the content of the private vices that he supposed to be good. He realized that he had not disproven virtue, but merely smuggled it in under another name.⁸ In his “Journal of a Voyage” (1726), he decided that virtue was necessary after all, both in human relations and for individual happiness. Considering the first, he concluded that none could embrace a vicious way of life and maintain a good reputation. “It is impossible,” he wrote, “for a man, though he has all the cunning of a devil, to live and die a villain, and yet conceal it so well as to carry the name of an honest fellow to the grave with him, but some one by some accident or other shall discover him.”⁹ Considering the second, he questioned his proud opinion that he was self-sufficient. Aboard the vessel, he noted that he required the companionship of others, as well as the virtues that nourished it. He wrote, “One of the philosophers, I think it was Plato, used to say, that he had rather be the veriest stupid block in nature, than the possessor of all knowledge without some intelligent being to communicate it to.”¹⁰ Franklin returned to the question of virtue with these ends in mind.

⁷ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (hereafter *Autobiography*), ed. Leonard W. Labaree, Helen C. Boatfield, and Ralph L. Ketcham (New Haven, CT, 1964), 97.

⁸ Franklin wrote that the *Dissertation*'s conclusion, “that Vice and Virtue were empty distinctions,” “appear'd now not so clever a Performance as I once thought it” (*Autobiography*, 114).

⁹ Franklin, “Journal of a Voyage,” 1726, in *PBF*, 1:78, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=072a>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:85–86; Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven, CT, 2008), 30–32.

To correct the bad habits in his life, and to obtain success in the world, he wrote a "Plan of Conduct" (1726) to order his life rationally by adopting certain virtues.¹¹ Franklin's conversion from atheism to a natural religion is the theme of his "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion" (1728), a carefully worded creed that he recommends to his readers in his later *Autobiography*.¹² In the "Articles," Franklin posits a belief that there are gods that will benefit those who behave virtuously. His polytheism has long remained a mystery, but Kerry S. Walters and Douglas Anderson have argued persuasively that it was no hoax; Franklin's gods, Anderson writes, are ideals, or character models, woven into the nature of things, such as the "vocation" of printer, or "Cato" as an allegory of the shining virtues.¹³ In a time when the existence of biological species, or the essences of things such as human nature, was questioned as merely nominal, Franklin found in the Epicurean doctrine of the "the formal Cause of Happiness" a naturalistic, ethical standard for human beings rooted in their natural passions and the human ability to reason about them.¹⁴ In this way he appealed to the perfection of human nature in a normative sense, or how one ought to behave.

Two years later Franklin wrote "On the Providence of God," with its supposed twofold proof that there is an infinite God who created the universe and whose intervention in the world is proven by the constancy of human prayer. Scholars have overlooked "On the Providence of God" first because it appears in several ways either merely to repeat Franklin's earlier caricature of a priori metaphysical arguments in the *Dissertation* or to add very little to that argument.¹⁵ A. O. Aldridge suggests the essay is an

¹¹ Franklin, "Plan of Conduct," [1726], in *PBF*, 1:99, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=099a>.

¹² Franklin, "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion," 1728, in *ibid.*, 1:102–4, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=101a>; *Autobiography*, 148.

¹³ Douglas Anderson, *The Radical Enlightenments of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore, 1997), 104, 116; Kerry Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*, (Champaign, IL, 1998), 86–89; see Elizabeth Dunn, "From a Bold Youth to a Reflective Sage: A Reevaluation of Benjamin Franklin's Religion," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 111 (1987): 501–24.

¹⁴ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:780nH. Bayle writes that Epicurus "considered Happiness in itself, and in it's [sic] formal State."

¹⁵ Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, NC, 1967), 34–46; Jerry Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked* (Lawrence, KS, 2005–8), 166–72; J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 2006), 1:345–54; Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*, 70, 75–106; Lorraine Pangle, *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore, 2007), 205, 209–10.

unequivocal but logically unsupported statement adopting “God’s active participation in human affairs—a position from which [Franklin] later more than once retreated when beset by doubt.” Franklin’s conclusion—that God answers prayer—appears to Aldridge to be so weak that he suggests Franklin must have forgotten his argument in the *Dissertation*.¹⁶ Jerry Weinberger finds in all three of Franklin’s articles on providence the same parody of metaphysical speculation. While the first two essays begin with false propositions and end in non sequiturs, Franklin argues in “On the Providence of God” that all metaphysical speculation is psychological projection.¹⁷

A second reason “On the Providence of God” is overlooked is that it does not seem to fit with Franklin’s other writings. How could Franklin, man of the Enlightenment, write a proof of divine providence? Scholars have largely interpreted the essay to reveal Franklin’s “soft spot” with respect to the possibility of answered prayer. J. A. Leo Lemay argues that Franklin wrote this third essay pragmatically; while Franklin uncovered no evidence of an infinite God who answers prayer, he found it useful to believe in divine intervention anyway.¹⁸ Walters agrees, describing the essay as Franklin’s embrace of logical inconsistency when filled with existential angst about the possibility of no God.¹⁹ Lorraine Pangle sympathizes with this view while questioning Franklin’s sincerity in his treatment of the question of providence.²⁰ This scholarly view is similar to those of nonacademics, mentioned above—as proof of Franklin’s belief in God’s providence.

On the Origins of the Essay

An inquiry into the origin and intention of Franklin’s essay reveals the insufficiency of these interpretations. First, a careful reading of “On the Providence of God” shows that both Franklin’s arguments and his con-

¹⁶ Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature’s God*, 35.

¹⁷ Weinberger finds “On the Providence of God” to be identical to the *Dissertation*, save for a “slide to the agreement that God is infinitely good” (*Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, 171).

¹⁸ Lemay equates the argument of the *Dissertation* with that in “On the Providence of God” and concludes that Franklin found both religion and metaphysics to be probably false but useful (*Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 1:345, 354).

¹⁹ Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*, 104–5.

²⁰ Pangle, *Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*, 61.

clusion in this work are different than those of his *Dissertation*. Second, close study of the background and interpretation of the essay disproves the idea that "On the Providence of God" represents the author's leap of faith in divine providence. On the contrary, Franklin wrote it to logically disprove God's providence.

Regarding the essay's origin, we must consider the logical necessity of "On the Providence of God" within Franklin's own writings; we must be clear as to *why* he wrote it. Ralph Lerner, who finds the underlying philosophy of the piece to agree entirely with the *Dissertation*, concurs with Lemay and James Campbell that the work has a rhetorical component—a religious teaching that is salubrious for society. In Lerner's interpretation, Franklin, in apostolic fashion, wishes to strengthen the teaching of God's providence because it is necessary to the political project dear to his own heart: the amelioration of the human condition.²¹ I argue that Franklin's "On the Providence of God" is a defense of his "Articles of Belief," which had insufficiently addressed the challenges of atheism and revealed religion to his own naturalistic polytheism. Franklin places his natural religion first in opposition to atheism, which he understood to mean the belief in a disordered universe, and a human world devoid of any ethical standards or permanent truths. He places his natural religion secondly in opposition to the God of infinite attributes whose acts are external to nature. Christianity teaches that man must obey this infinite God who reveals his will through divine revelation. In "Articles of Belief," Franklin claimed to be unable to conceive of this God of infinite attributes and declares the infinite God to be, in the words of Samuel Clarke, "a *Supra-Mundane Intelligence*," thereby excluding, like Epicurus, "*Providence and God's Government . . . out of the World*."²² However, Franklin did not articulate why this inability to conceive of the infinite God should lead to his rejection of him. Just because he could not understand something does not mean that it is not true.

The first argument of revealed religion against naturalism, that an external artificer created the world, was that of voluntarism, in which an incorporeal, omnipotent God replaces an ordered conception of

²¹ Ralph Lerner, "Correspondence," *Claremont Review of Books* 6, no. 3 (2006): 11; Lerner, "The Gospel According to the Apostle Ben," *American Political Thought* 1 (2012): 140; James Campbell, "The Pragmatist in Franklin," in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Carla Mulford (New York and Cambridge, 2008), 104–16.

²² Clarke, *Collection of Papers*, 15.

nature. This view was forcefully presented by Sir Robert Boyle and adopted by Increase Mather.²³ Boyle's scientific theories proceeded from his theology.²⁴ He found in scientific positivism—the declaration that man cannot know by his reason alone whether there is a God—a way to defend Christian dogma from the threats of deism and Catholic scholasticism, both of which he called atheism for their expulsion of divine governance from nature. These two schools of thought turned to classical Greek philosophic arguments—which posited that man by his reason alone could know his duty—as an additional support to the teachings of God's divine revelation in Scripture. Boyle believed this position led easily to the conclusion that man did not need divine revelation at all.²⁵ Christianity's acceptance of what he believed to be two contradictory approaches to knowledge—reason and revelation—made its revelatory doctrines susceptible to rational criticism.

To eliminate this contradiction, Boyle taught that God's fundamental attribute is his omnipotence, thereby destroying the old conception of nature. Philosophers had hitherto distinguished between natural and artificial motions: natural bodies moved toward their own ends according to an innate principle of change, while artificial bodies, possessing no intrinsic form, depended upon an external agent and acted according to the intentions of the artificer.²⁶ An artificial body possessed no organic essence; it could be understood mechanically by the way its parts connected and worked upon one another. In Boyle's philosophy, God is an incorporeal mechanic who, by acting upon all passive matter, created the world: a giant artifice. Because each creation is a machine set into motion, there are no "natural" motions and, therefore, no intrinsic standard of "nature" that human reason could use as a guide for behavior. As man is incapable of knowing his ends solely by his reason and passions, he must

²³ Margaret J. Osler, "Providence and Divine Will in Gassendi's Views on Scientific Knowledge," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 549–60; Increase Mather, *Remarkable Providences Illustrative of the Earlier Days of American Colonisation* (London, 1856), xxxiv. Mather claimed to inductively verify God's providence according to "the rules and method described by that learned and excellent person Robert Boyle."

²⁴ J. R. Jacob, "Boyle's Atomism," *Social Studies of Science* 8 (1978): 218.

²⁵ Boyle's argument, to which here I can only allude, is made in several writings, notably *The Usefulness of Experimental Philosophy; By Way of Exhortation to The Study of it*, in Boyle, *Philosophical Works*, 1:129–32.

²⁶ See Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), 239–51; Margaret G. Cook, "Divine Artifice and Natural Mechanism: Robert Boyle's Mechanical Philosophy of Nature," *Osiris*, 2nd ser., 16 (2001): 142.

look to an external deity to provide them. By attacking the foundation of human reason, Boyle reduced all arguments about God and how man should live to revelations. Man is capable of manufacturing means to these revelatory ends, to which he must submit.

The second argument of revealed religion against naturalism was Ralph Cudworth's argument that God created and governed the world from his attribute of goodness: "The reason, why God made the world, was from his own overflowing and communicative goodness, that there might be other beings also happy, besides him, and enjoy themselves."²⁷ Rejecting Boyle's voluntarist argument, which emphasized God's omnipotence, Cudworth argued that God's chief attribute and the cause of his mastery over nature was his goodness. Cudworth studied the ancient pagan views of God with an eye to the origin of evil, or the government of God in the world, and concluded that there were two fundamentally conflicting viewpoints: the pagan view and the Christian view. The pagan view is that the supreme God is "a soul of the world only" or the "nature of things."²⁸ The pagans distinguished between matter, or "one supreme unmade Deity, and all other inferior generated gods."²⁹ The lesser divinities, partaking in this nature, were charged with "government of the whole world."³⁰ Cudworth, equating this belief in nature with atheism, argued instead for the Christian view: a supreme, immaterial creator who was provident, by some means, in the government of the world.³¹

The strength of Cudworth's argument that God creates out of goodness is that it provides an answer as to why God creates. Boyle's omnipotent God needs no justification; he rules tyrannically by divine fiat. But in Cudworth's telling, because of God's goodness, his will is not arbitrary; his perfect goodness aligns with his justice.³² God justly punishes evil, in this life or the next, and providently rewards the good.

²⁷ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: Wherein all the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted, and Its Impossibility Demonstrated*, trans. John Harrison, 3 vols. (London, 1845), 3:486. On Cudworth's rejection of Boyle's voluntarism, see 1:223 and 3:461.

²⁸ Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 1:426; 2:276; see Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:779nF, on the "Soul of the World."

²⁹ Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 1:417.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:364.

³¹ Richard Popkin, *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology* (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 1990), 14; Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 2:275–76. See 1:386 on creation ex nihilo and 3:484 on the inferior ministers of God.

³² Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 3:494.

Cudworth argues that, empirically, the subtle working hand of God's justice and goodness are apparent in the evolution of human civilization. God's goodness is also evinced by his creation of a world suitable for human existence and by man's perfect adaptation to nature. If man admits his capacity for happiness and the goodness of nature, his gratitude finds an object. The creation is not good simply; it is good *because* a perfectly good creator made it. It is as perfect as it could be. Moreover, Cudworth argues that God's creation does not disturb his perfection. God did not create evil, nor does he lose his perfection by his providence. God, who is self-sufficient, is displeased with the imperfection of his creatures, but does not attain his own perfection by helping them to theirs.

Pierre Bayle's "Epicurus"

Franklin's "On the Providence of God" is a response to these challenges as well as a defense of his Epicureanism. His argument is influenced by Bayle's entry "Epicurus" in *An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1710). Franklin was familiar with Bayle, a pivotal Enlightenment thinker, and would list him as an "eminent writer" alongside Locke and Bacon.³³ Robert C. Bartlett writes that the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* "was the most widely held book in French libraries in the eighteenth century and can be said to have been the real arsenal of all Enlightenment."³⁴ While the *Dictionary* was written in French (Harvard College turned down a copy in 1724 for this reason), it was translated into English in 1710; Franklin's later correspondent James Logan of Philadelphia ordered a four-volume set in 1714, and at least one volume was present in the library of Boston minister Ebenezer Pemberton in 1717.³⁵ Lemay suggests that Franklin had

³³ Franklin, "Rules for Making Oneself a Disagreeable Companion," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 15, 1750, in *PBF*, 4:73, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=48&page=073a>.

³⁴ Robert C. Bartlett, "On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu," *Journal of Politics* 63 (2001): 3.

³⁵ Bayle, *An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (London, 1710); Norman Fiering, "The First American Enlightenment: Tillotson, Leverett, and Philosophical Anglicanism," *New England Quarterly* 54 (1981): 322n29, 330; Loganian Library and Edwin Wolf, *The Library of James Logan of Philadelphia, 1674–1751* (Philadelphia, 1974), 43, 48–49. Logan requested that John Askew obtain a four-volume edition for him in 1714. He wrote to Robert Hunter on April 2, 1719, "I do not find any where in my Bayle That he sayes positively the Immortality of ye Soul is to be proved from ye S. Scriptures."

read Bayle by 1725 and that Bayle may have influenced the writing of the *Dissertation*.³⁶ In 1730 Franklin printed a series of articles in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* that, A. O. Aldridge argues, reflected "the opinion of Bayle that a society of atheists could attain to as high a degree of morality as a society of religionists."³⁷ In 1731, Franklin founded the Library Company of Philadelphia, and Bayle's five-volume *Dictionary* was among the first forty-five books ordered in 1732.³⁸ Franklin would request that "10 Folio Volumes of Bayle's Dictionary" be returned from Boston for his personal library in 1764.³⁹ Nevertheless, one would not expect to find an attribution to Bayle in Franklin's writings. Franklin seldom lists his sources, and Bayle himself mocks the scholarly priests who obsess over footnotes instead of just borrowing others' arguments.⁴⁰ Like Bayle, Franklin often shrouds his own essays in irony.

Bayle's essay "Epicurus" promotes Epicurean philosophy and defends it against the charge of atheism by the Christian Neoplatonists. His primary aim in writing it was to institute a new materialistic philosophy to replace Christian dualism, in which God is an immaterial substance that acts upon matter. Consequently, in "Epicurus" Bayle questions whether divine providence governs the world and whether Plutarch, a Platonist, was right to argue that Epicurean principles, which reject divine providence, fail to provide for human happiness.⁴¹ Bayle concedes that the Epicureans did not have access to the revelatory truths of Christianity, but, limiting his consideration of the argument only to the "light of reason," he defends

³⁶ Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 2:100.

³⁷ Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God*, 124. Aldridge also suggests (89–90) that Franklin's 1735 arguments against Christian Orthodoxy in the Hemphill controversy were drawn from Bayle's *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*. Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany, 2000), xxiii.

³⁸ Albert J. Edmunds, "The First Books Imported by America's First Great Library: 1732," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 30 (1906): 301. Though the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* did not arrive with the rest of the books that November, it appears in the library's first catalog in 1741. Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 1:279; Alfred Owen Aldridge, "Benjamin Franklin and the *Maryland Gazette*," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 44 (1949): 177–89.

³⁹ Franklin to Jonathan Williams, Feb. 24, 1764, in *PBF*, 11:88, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=11&page=088a>.

⁴⁰ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:778nE.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:785–86. See Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 3:476: "That of Plutarch therefore is most true here . . . That there is a necessary connexion betwixt those two things, Divine Providence, and the permanence or immortality of human souls, one and the same reason confirming them both; neither can one of these be taken alone without the other."

Epicurus's philosophy as superior to that of the Platonists and Athenian priests:

Methinks that, among so many Apologists for *Epicurus*, there should have been some, who, at the same Time that they condemned his Impiety, should have endeavored to shew, That it was a Natural and Philosophical Consequence of the Error common to all the Heathens, about the Eternal Existence of Matter[*S*]. I shall make some Observations thereupon, which will shew, amongst other Things, I. That when a Man does not follow the System of the Holy Scripture, concerning the Creation, the more consequentially he reasons, the more he goes astray. II. That that System alone has the Advantage of laying the solid Foundation of the Providence, and Perfections of God[*T*]. There is nothing more wretched than *Epicurus's* way of explaining the Liberty of Human Actions[*U*].⁴²

Despite Bayle's claims, his intention is to show that Epicurus's arguments are superior to "the System of the Holy Scripture." As is made evident in his extensive footnotes, Bayle's "Platonists" are actually Neoplatonists, such as Cudworth, and his "Priest[s] of *Athens*" are Christian theologians.⁴³ Through the mouth of Epicurus, Bayle argues in footnote S that the heathen argument for "the eternal Existence of Matter" is superior to that for a creator of matter. He refutes the arguments for a creator of matter as illogical, first from the position of God's omnipotence, then from the position that God creates from his goodness. In footnote T, Bayle further argues that the Christian view of God contradicts its claims of God's perfection, for it describes the most miserable deity imaginable. And in footnote U, Bayle adopts the Epicurean argument for human free agency over the Christian teaching of free will.⁴⁴

Franklin, undoubtedly impressed by Bayle's use of logic, employs his arguments against Christianity in his own essay. This is not to say that Franklin agreed with Bayle entirely. He was more circumspect about the charge of atheism because he did not think a genuinely atheist society was desirable or possible.⁴⁵ Moreover, he diverged with Bayle on the best way of life; instead, Franklin adopted an active version of Epicureanism

⁴² Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:786–90. Capital letters in brackets are note references in the original text.

⁴³ Ibid., 2:786–89nS; 789–90nT.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2:790–92nU.

⁴⁵ Franklin to —, Dec. 13, 1757, in *PBF*, 7:293, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=7&page=293a>.

that included the political life, something both Epicurus and Bayle taught was incompatible with the life of philosophic skepticism.

*On the Providence of God in the Government of the World*⁴⁶

This leads us to Franklin's own argument in "On the Providence of God." Franklin organizes it, in the form of a classical oration, into seven parts.⁴⁷ His outline is exactly the same as Bayle's: he begins with the logic of the Creation, "laying the solid Foundation of the Providence, and Perfections of God," and concludes with a treatment of the "Liberty of Human Actions." Also like Bayle, Franklin decided to disguise his own thoughts in irony, and he had several reasons to do so. For one, as a Philadelphia businessman presenting his views on providence before his "Pot Companions," he did not wish to acquire the reputation of an atheist.⁴⁸ This, however, was not his primary reason for dissimulation—his religious devotion was already suspect, and he certainly did not concern himself about financial repercussions when he took up his pen against Presbyterian orthodoxy several years later. Rather, Franklin was applying his own lessons on agreeable conversation; he genuinely liked his drinking companions and saw no need to antagonize those who could not understand his arguments. His solution was to dissemble his own opinions in concision and irony.⁴⁹

Franklin begins his presentation by ironically "laying the solid Foundation of the Providence." After asserting that his audience is only persuaded by the authority of reason, not opinion, he presents a first principle, based upon the ancient opinions of all men in all ages, that there is a deity, and he is creator of the universe:

⁴⁶ Franklin, "On the Providence of God," in *ibid.*, 1:264; see Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 1:351, on the essay's relation to Franklin's Nov. 9, 1779, letter to Benjamin Vaughan.

⁴⁷ Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 1:345–46; see Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:786–89nS, for Bayle's own seven-part division.

⁴⁸ Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God*, 34–35.

⁴⁹ On Franklin as an ironic thinker, see Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago, 1988), 80–81; Hiram Catton, *The Politics of Progress* (Gainesville, FL, 1988), 27n16, 374; Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and the Education of America," *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992): 359; Ralph Lerner, "Dr. Janus," in *Revolutions Revisited: Two Faces of the Politics of Enlightenment* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994), 9–12; Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, chaps. 5–6; Paul E. Kerry, "Franklin's Satiric Vein," in *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, 37–49.

It might be judg'd an Affront to your Understandings should I go about to prove this first Principle, the Existence of a Deity and that he is the Creator of the Universe, for that would suppose you ignorant of what all Mankind in all Ages have agreed in.

The statement is glaringly false: all pagan philosophers rejected the idea of a creator.⁵⁰ Franklin's essay is his defense of the pagan against the Christian view of nature; indeed, the essay turns upon his "proof" of the first principle, for therein lies the difference between the pagan moralist and Christian metaphysical approaches to the question of providence. The first, the Epicurean position, is that God is an eternal, material, uncreated being, owing existence to itself only, without "Dependance [*sic*] upon any other Thing, either as to it's [*sic*] Essence, Existence, Attributes, or Properties."⁵¹ The ancient natural philosophers agreed that matter could not be produced: creation *ex nihilo* is impossible. But the Christian view is that God, the immaterial and omnipotent creator, formed the material world when he moved it and infused it with "the breath of life."⁵² Franklin's irony has already begun, for he supposes his audience ignorant of what mankind of all ages has agreed: that the very notion of the Christian God violates the logical simplicity of nature and the judgments that proceed from it. Bayle writes that this view contradicts the "Laws and Notions of Order, which are the standing Rules of our Judgments and Reasonings."⁵³ Those who say that matter was formed by an immaterial God must rely on God's omnipotence, or force, and not the precise reason that begins from our original notions of matter.

Franklin proceeds with his own description of a "great" deity: "1. That [God] must be a Being of great Wisdom; 2. That he must be a Being of great Goodness and 3. That he must be a Being of great Power." But Franklin begins his first *a priori* proof of the deity by instead setting out to prove the "Perfections of God."⁵⁴ He will first show that God is a being of

⁵⁰ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:786nS: "[The] Natural Philosophers of the Heathens . . . all agreed in this Point, that the Matter of the World was unproduced. They never disputed among themselves upon the Question, whether any Thing was made out of Nothing."

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2:787nS.

⁵² Genesis 2:7; Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 3:493.

⁵³ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:787nS. Bayle writes that the idea of a creator is a "bastard and monstrous Production" "that shocks the most exact Notions, to which those who philosophize are bound to conform themselves."

⁵⁴ See Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, 170–71.

not *great*, but *infinite* Wisdom. Franklin separates his own thoughts and observations from the metaphysical proof of an infinite God external to matter, and he does this because his demonstration constitutes a two-part argument *against* the creation and providence of an immaterial deity. His next three proposals are that God must be of "infinite" wisdom, "great" goodness, and "infinite" power. He begins with God's attribute of infinite wisdom:

That he must be a Being of infinite Wisdom, appears in his admirable Order and Disposition of Things, whether we consider the heavenly Bodies, the Stars and Planets, and their wonderful regular Motions, or this Earth compounded of such an Excellent mixture of all the Elements; or the admirable Structure of Animal Bodies of such infinite Variety.

Franklin notes that every animal has "adapted to its Nature, and the Way of Life it is to be placed in, whether on Earth, in the Air or in the Waters." This adaptation is so precise "that the highest and most exquisite human Reason, cannot find a fault and say this would have been better so or in another Manner, which whoever considers attentively and thoroughly will be astonish'd and swallow'd up in Admiration." The wisdom of God pertains to the laws of nature, and Franklin's praise of God is an implicit critique of the logical arguments for an omniscient deity. The Epicureans argued that matter exists by its own nature and necessity; there is no need for God's improvement, or a simpler organization upon an eternal state. Much less is there need for an immaterial governor. The divines taught that God improved self-sufficient matter by forming it to create life. To make this argument, they distinguished between self-sufficient matter without any organizing principle and an arbitrary God who is all motion, outside of time yet appearing in every action—they must conceive of no order at all, which is inconceivable, or an affront to human reason. About the notion of an infinite God, Franklin wrote in the "Articles": "it is impossible for me to have any positive clear Idea of that which is infinite and incomprehensible."⁵⁵ Why, moreover, would God intervene to improve what is already self-sufficient? The divines claimed that "God exercised his Power over Matter meerey [*sic*] from a Principle of Goodness."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Franklin, "Articles of Belief," in *PBF*, 1:102.

⁵⁶ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:787nS.

Franklin's central argument for God's perfection is that God is a being of "great goodness." God's goodness can only be "great," rather than "infinite," because there is evil in the world. Franklin gives two demonstrations of God's great goodness: first, he has given life to creatures, which show their recognition of this goodness by their desire for preservation; second, God has provided plentiful sustenance.⁵⁷ Importantly, Franklin distinguishes between God's providence to "almost all animals in general" and to "men." God has provided water and air, light, and sunshine for all animals. Franklin shows God's providence to men in three examples, "each of which particulars if considered seriously and carefully would fill us with the highest Love and Affection." These are: "useful Vegetables"; "the most useful of Metals"; and "the most useful Animals, as Horses, Oxen and Sheep," which God made easiest to raise or procure in quantity or numbers. However, Franklin's examples of what are "useful" defy this argument. Particular providence does not supply men with the most useful vegetables; man, by the sweat of his brow, grows and produces them himself. Likewise, man produces the most "useful Metals as Iron," and man tames and raises useful animals. After the consideration that God did not provide men with perfect sustenance, Franklin is *not* filled with "the highest Love and Affection." The divines, like Franklin, admitted the existence of evil—God appears to be merely *great* and not *infinite*—but their response was that God, nevertheless, is all-powerful and intervenes in his order.

Franklin's third claim is that God is a being of infinite power. His power is manifest in his ability to form and compound

such Vast Masses of Matter as this Earth and the Sun and innumerable Planets and Stars, and give them such prodigious Motion, and yet so to govern them in their greatest Velocity as that they shall not flie off out of their appointed Bounds nor dash one against another, to their mutual Destruction.

Franklin ironically suggests that if God is immaterial, he cannot logically participate in matter to govern it. In so doing, he echoes Bayle, who asks: how can God

⁵⁷ See Cudworth, *Intellectual System of the Universe*, 3:490.

change the State and Condition of Matter? Must he not produce Motion in it? And, in order to [do] that, must he not touch and push it? If he can touch and push it, he is not distinct from Matter; and if he be not distinct from Matter, it is without Reason you admit two increated Beings; the one which you call *Matter*, the other which you call *God*: For since there is in effect nothing but Matter in the Universe, our Dispute is at an End; the Author of the World, that Director, the Divine Providence in Question, vanish into Smoak.⁵⁸

The idea that an immaterial God forms matter does violence to reason, for it requires the superimposition of an entirely new, immaterial, spiritual nature—of which we have no experience—that destroys the order of material nature. Logically, an immaterial God could not know or be aware of matter in order to move it, for he could not form it without participating in it.⁵⁹ For God to alter, touch, or interact with matter, he must himself be capable of physical sensation—and hence, part material—and must move according to the laws of motion. If one says that God can move matter, it is only a small stretch further to say that God can create matter *ex nihilo*.

Franklin writes that the origin of the conception of God's infinite power, by which he creates matter, logically follows from man's beliefs about God's wisdom and goodness: "tis easy to conceive his Power, when we are convinc'd of his infinite Knowledge and Wisdom." If one is convinced of God's omniscience in interrupting self-sufficient matter (how could God improve upon perfection?) in order to create a world with evil, one must superadd a belief in God's omnipotence. If the world were perfectly good, God would not need to govern at all. But if we are not convinced of a good God's omniscience in the government of a calamitous world, it would be even harder to conceive of his omnipotence. Franklin asks the reader to consider that the origin of man's conception of power comes by way of comparing experiences of what he is able to do with his weak knowledge of nature:

Weak and foolish Creatures as we are, by knowing the Nature of a few Things can produce such wonderful Effects; such as for instance by knowing the Nature only of Nitre and Sea Salt mix'd we can make a Water

⁵⁸ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:787nS.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:789nT.

which will dissolve the hardest Iron and by adding one Ingredient more, can make another Water which will dissolve Gold and render the most Solid Bodies fluid—and by knowing the Nature of Salt Peter Sulphur and Charcoal those mean Ingredient mix'd we can shake the Air in the most terrible Manner, destroy Ships Houses and Men at a Distance and in an Instant, overthrow Cities, rend Rocks into a Thousand Pieces, and level the highest Mountains.

Man's weak knowledge of nature has led him, and not a providential God, primarily to acts of "mutual Destruction" that omnipotent God fails to prevent. Franklin exclaims: "What Power must he possess who not only knows the Nature of every Thing in the Universe, but can make Things of new Natures with the greatest Ease and at his Pleasure!"⁶⁰ Franklin then segues to human achievement, or creation. The new science makes possible the construction of "new natures." The "new nature" is not the immaterial being whom man imagines to govern by divine fiat; it is one constructed by man with his knowledge of the natural world. Such providential human heroes, who are ranked among the gods, are sufficient replacements for the old, tyrannical gods.⁶¹ The evils of the world can be ameliorated by good men who possess great wisdom and who may acquire great power. Furthermore, if man may acquire knowledge of the natural world that gives him power to change it, then it is man himself who has failed to govern his own nature.

The Importance of Prayer in God's Governance

Having hitherto subtly refuted the a priori logical explanations of an immaterial God, Franklin follows Bayle in approaching the question of God's providence from the opposite perspective, that of the role of prayer in human affairs.⁶² Setting aside the logical impossibility of God's dominion over matter, Franklin turns solely to the question of God's goodness.

⁶⁰ Franklin also compares the unnecessary destructive use of gunpowder to the virtue of humanity in *Poor Richard Improved*, 1749. See PBF 3:340, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=38&page=331a>.

⁶¹ Franklin treats heroism, among other places, in *Poor Richard Improved*, 1748, in *ibid.*, 3:255, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=38&page=243a>: "Your true hero fights to preserve, and not to destroy, the lives, liberties, and estates, of his people." As Bayle points out, it was humans who "built Towns, made Laws, and civiliz'd the Age" ("Epicurus," 2:788nS).

⁶² Franklin follows Bayle, who concedes the a priori argument and turns to the question of God's goodness: "Let us, if you please, reckon all my Reasons *à priori* for nothing, would he say in the third

Franklin observes that what men desire is what they pray for; thus, he considers the nature of God in light of the fact that men have always prayed. What do their prayers really say about the nature of God? The importance of prayer, according to Cudworth's own argument that goodness must accompany efficacy, is that it reveals man's thoughts on the evil in the world. The only way to accept the first principle of God's perfect goodness is to argue that God intervenes in his perfect creation to punish evil and reward virtue.

Franklin offers four possible ways that a perfect God relates to the government of the world and claims that, by the process of elimination, he will prove that God works through particular providence: "I shall endeavour to shew the first 3 Suppositions to be inconsistent with the common Light of Reason; and that the 4th is most agreeable to it, and therefore most probably true." Franklin's criterion for reason is the following consideration: "that Being which from its Power is most able to Act, from its Wisdom knows best how to act, and from its Goodness would always certainly act best." Like Bayle, Franklin unites good judgment and execution.⁶³

The first possibility is that God has decreed all things that have come to pass, "and left nothing to the Course [of] Nature, nor allow'd any Creature free agency." Universally provident, God leaves nothing to the capacity of human reason. This first argument is that of Calvinism; it correlates to the corpuscularian philosophy of Robert Boyle, who argued that God's omnipotence negated the order of nature and the agency of man. Franklin introduces problems from the "Light of Reason" for such a conclusion.

First, there is no reason to worship God; if he unchangeably decreed all things, he is no more all-powerful. Rather there is reason *not* to worship God, who introduced injury, grief, pain, and immorality into the world and decreed some things "contrary to the very Notion of a wise and good Being." The Creator's defective attempt at improvement, which dis-

Place to the *Platonic*. Nay, I give up this Objection, viz. That Goodness is not to be commended, unless it be accompanied with Judgment." Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:788nS.

⁶³ Franklin uses this criterion elsewhere. See *A Defense of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill's Observations* . . . (Philadelphia, 1735), in *PBF*, 2:119–20, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=28&page=090a>; and "A Letter from Father Abraham to His Beloved Son [Aug. 1758], in *ibid.*, 8:125, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=8&page=123a>. Bayle judges according to the "Light of Reason" ("Epicurus," 2:790nT) and uses the same criterion of reason, "That Goodness is not to be commended, unless it be accompanied with Judgment" (*ibid.*, 2:788nS).

ordered the Creation, renders the condition of matter infinitely more unhappy than that eternal, necessary, and independent formless state in which it had been before the generation of the world. Finally, Franklin argues that it would be absurd for God to make man to pray when prayers are useless, of no service to God or man. Likening Calvinism to idolatry, Franklin opines: "Surely it is not more difficult to believe the World was made by a God of Wood or Stone, than that the God who made the World should be such a God as this."

Franklin's second possibility of divine providence is that "without decreeing any thing, [God] left all to general Nature and the Events of Free Agency in his Creatures, which he never alters or interrupts."⁶⁴ The deists taught that God created the world but does not govern it providentially. Man freely uses the order of nature for his own devices; God neither decrees nor rewards virtue. Man is completely on his own, an abandoned, bastard child. Franklin argues that such a spectator God cannot be good:

In this Case imagine the Deity looking on and beholding the Ways of his Creatures; some Hero's [*sic*] in Virtue he sees are incessantly endeavouring [*sic*] the Good of others, they labour thro vast difficulties, they suffer incredible Hardships and Miseries to accomplish this End, in hopes to please a Good God, and obtain his Favour, which they earnestly Pray for; what Answer can he make them within himself but this; *take the Reward Chance may give you, I do not intermeddle in these Affairs*; he sees others continually doing all manner of Evil, and bringing by their Actions Misery and Destruction among Mankind: What can he say here but this, *if Chance rewards you I shall not punish you, I am not to be concerned*.

God, supposedly "a wise and an infinitely Good Being," watches idly and "utterly unconcern'd," neither rewarding virtue nor punishing vice, while man exerts himself; the world is abandoned to the machinations of human free will. In this argument of providence, one of political atheism, man exists in a world of chance and creates his own virtues without regard to the deity; he must perfect a bad order.

Franklin follows this bleak outlook with a third alternative: "3. [God] decreed some Things unchangeably, and left others to general Nature and the Events of Free agency, which also he never alters or interrupts." This

⁶⁴ Lerner suggests this is Franklin's own opinion ("Gospel According to the Apostle Ben," 131, 139n7).

was the position of the Cambridge Neoplatonists, who had rejected the old Calvinism for a type of Arminianism, in order to argue for man's freedom.⁶⁵ God preordains miracles (aberrations to the law of nature, such as the birth of Christ), natural order, and free agency, and then does not interfere (though how man is to determine what has been decreed, whether in miracles or God's commands to virtue, is not stated).⁶⁶ But if this is so, Franklin reasons, then God "has nothing to do." He is powerless, as he is "everlastingly idle." According to Franklin, this supposition is absurd, "the greatest Violence to common Reason." As in the first example, he compares this alternative to superstition. By such belief, he writes, we "unGod him, if I may be allow'd the Expression; . . . he can cause us neither Good nor Harm; he is no more to be regarded than a lifeless Image, than Dagon, or Baall, or Bell and the Dragon."

In each of these three propositions of belief, Franklin applies the criterion of the efficacy of prayer. Because all of them demonstrate that God cannot be good, Franklin suggests the fourth proposition is "therefore most probably true":

That the Deity sometimes interferes by his particular Providence, and sets aside the Events which would otherwise have been produc'd in the Course of Nature, or by the Free Agency of Men; and this is perfectly agreeable with what we can know of his Attributes and Perfections.

The trouble is that the fourth proposition, a belief in human agency, contradicts the principle of God's infinite attributes, particularly that of omnipotence. Franklin offers one short argument to reconcile free agency with infinite God, after which he claims he will proceed to show what our response to God ought to be, or how "the Duties of Religion necessary follow the Belief of a Providence." The argument is this: the reader agrees that God is infinitely wise, good, and powerful, and also free. Man is in some degree wise, good, and powerful. If God has communicated to man part of his attributes, "is it then impossible for him to communicate any Part of his Freedom, and make us also in some Degree Free? Is not even his *infinite* Power sufficient for this?" Franklin concedes that "much more

⁶⁵ On Bayle's dispute with LeClerc over Cudworth's "*plastic and vital natures*," see Des Maizeaux, "The Life of Mr Bayle," in Bayle, *Dictionary Historical and Critical*, 1:xc1–xcv.

⁶⁶ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:789nT: "If some Things happen which he has forbidden, and which he punishes, they do not however happen contrary to his Decrees; and they are subservient to the Ends he has proposed to himself from all Eternity, and which are the greatest Mysteries of the Gospel."

might be offer'd to demonstrate clearly that Men are in some Degree free Agents, and accountable for their Actions," but writes that he will have to treat it at a later time. Scholars have taken Franklin's argument at face value, but we will see that Franklin's answer both repeats the Epicurean myth of free will and subtly reveals the origin of the myth and the proper understanding of human freedom.⁶⁷

Epicurus had invented his theory of the swerve, or the "Motion of Declination" of atoms, as a creation myth to free his followers from the tyranny of the teaching of fate and to support the teaching of morality, which rests logically upon the possibility of human agency.⁶⁸ In this myth, atoms, which are free, communicate their property of liberty to human beings. In the words of Lucretius, "*The perfect Freedom of the Mind*" is "*Above the Pow'r of Fate*."⁶⁹ This teaching is itself absurd, for belief in God's infinite attributes contradicts the possibility of human freedom. Franklin subtly provides a brilliant argument for the origin of the belief in free will—or man's freedom from his material nature—by tracing it to man's belief in fate. If God is of "infinite Wisdom, Goodness and Power" and yet does not answer prayer—itsself born of indignation at God's disordered world—then he cannot be good. To avoid calumny against God, man embraces the contradiction of the speculative belief in determinism with the chaotic belief in free will, which insists upon no order at all. There is a trace of the same religious zeal that insists upon God's omnipotence in those who insist upon fatalism and necessity. As Franklin notes in a 1746 letter, the teaching of free will extends the irrational split between spirit and matter to every individual soul.⁷⁰ Metaphysicians, whether of free will or determinism, attempt to unite two different classes of facts by analogy, only to sacrifice the common sense of one to the other. Arguments for determinism attempt to explain the actions of voluntary agents in terms of the laws of matter, while philosophers of will attempt to explain the phenomena of motion in terms of the voluntary actions of agents. Both require belief in an underlying providential fate, controlled

⁶⁷ Lerner, "Gospel According to the Apostle Ben," 140; Aldridge writes that this is "a somewhat irrelevant and not very convincing exposition of free agency in human creatures" (*Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God*, 38–39); Locke makes the same argument in *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, 5th ed. (London, 1706), 457n*.

⁶⁸ Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:790nU.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:791nU.

⁷⁰ Franklin to [Thomas Hopkinson?], [Oct. 16, 1746], in *PBF*, 3:84–88, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=3&page=084a>.

either by atoms or by God. As a young man, Franklin had erroneously believed in the former, comparing moral liberty to a falling stone in his *Dissertation*.⁷¹

Such a contradiction, Franklin wrote to Joseph Priestly in 1782, is unnecessary. Considering the "Works of Nature," he refers to two parts, "inanimate" and "animate."⁷² Studies of the inanimate world proceed from the self-evident truth that every cause has an effect. Similarly, all ethical inquiries are based upon the human experiential fact of freedom of choice. Man, according to his own nature, is moved by his desires, most of all his desire for happiness. A voluntary agent is the author of his own determinations; Franklin wrote in his 1758 "Letter from Father Abraham" that the wise man must "*take particular Notice of HIS OWN Actions, and of HIS OWN Thoughts and Intentions* which are the Original of his actions."⁷³ Humans must choose between desires for the multitude of goods constructed by their imaginations. Franklin demonstrates that "Men are in some Degree free Agents":

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

Using a standard of efficacy for comparison, we must choose what to believe about God. Franklin says it is "highly reasonable" to believe there is a God who creates from his power or his goodness to whom we should pray, for the alternative is absurd—that no God of particular providence exists. Of course, this is the alternative we, as readers, are driven to consider.

⁷¹ Franklin, *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*, in *PBF*, 1:62: "it is a Liberty of the same Nature with the Fall of a heavy Body to the Ground."

⁷² Franklin to Joseph Priestley, June 7, 1782, in *PBF*, 37:444, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=37&page=444a>; see Jessica Riskin, "Poor Richard's Leyden Jar: Electricity and Economy in Franklinist France," *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences* 28 (1998): 304–6.

⁷³ Franklin, "Letter from Father Abraham," in *PBF*, 8:128.

Franklin suggests it is unreasonable, from the argument of God's goodness, to suppose that God is provident. If an external God created the world, then he has foreseen all of its disorders. If he does nothing to prevent them, then he cannot have made the world out of a principle of goodness.⁷⁴ But if we say that God does prevent them, we destroy his perfections; God cannot be simultaneously provident and self-sufficient, for he is obligated to correct for the evils of his creation. This position contradicts the felicity of God. Instead of destroying his flawed creation, God stubbornly preserves it and is thus constantly engaged in the task of fixing its disorders or fighting its decay. As Bayle writes, this belief requires "an idea of the most unhappy Nature that can be conceived."⁷⁵ God designs the world for his creatures, intending their happiness, yet those very creatures must devour one another for their very preservation. They cannibalize and persecute one another and are prey to the miseries of nature and their own vices. God eternally struggles with the defective matter productive of those disorders; he is "obliged to have always the Thunderbolt in his Hand, and to pour down upon the Earth Pestilence, War, and Famine."⁷⁶ Yet he has made no more progress against evil in thousands of years of labor than since the first day he formed matter, although he desires rest from his war. If God is pleased with what happens under his providence, then he delights in evil; if he is displeased with it, then he is unhappy. Both conclusions, according to Franklin, violate reason.

Humans cannot be "in some Degree free Agents" while they are oppressed by the cruel tyrant of belief in particular providence. In his example of a nation oppressed by a cruel tyrant, Franklin leads man in a mental and political revolt of disbelief in God's providence. We return to Franklin's guiding criterion: "that Being which from its Power is most able to Act, from its Wisdom knows best how to act, and from its Goodness would always certainly act best." Man is that being. Man, who participates in matter, is capable of mending the scheme of providence and intervening in the government of the world as he acquires the wis-

⁷⁴ Bayle writes of this second argument against God's providence, "[Epicurus's] last Objection would be the strongest: He would shew to his Adversary, that the most intimate, general, and infallible Notion we have of God is, that God enjoys a perfect Felicity: Now this is incompatible with the Supposition of Providence" ("Epicurus," 2:788nS).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2:789nS.

dom of nature and the power to improve it. Hitherto man has not improved the world. While the "Light of Reason," which judges our experienced disorders of nature, proves God's *great*—not infinite—attributes, humans have placed their faith in speculative a priori postulates. This disjuncture between reason and religion is caused by man's maladjustment to his nature, which requires his faith in God's particular providence. Franklin writes of this belief,

Now if tis unreasonable to suppose it out of the Power of the Deity to help and favour us particularly or that we are out of his Hearing or Notice or that Good Actions do not procure more of his Favour than ill Ones. Then I conclude, that believing a Providence we have the Foundation of all true Religion.

Franklin constructs an if-then proposition and bids us question the alternative. If it is not reasonable to suppose God is a God of particular providence, then disbelief in God's particular providence is the foundation of all true religion.

The Duties of Natural Religion

Franklin writes of "the Duties of Religion," which follow from natural religion: "This Religion will be a Powerful Regulator of our Actions, give us Peace and Tranquility within our own Minds, and render us Benevolent, Useful and Beneficial to others." Man's new faith in his own providence, or industry, which follows his rejection of orthodox Christianity, frees him to mend the scheme of providence, or to impose new habits upon natural inclinations, channeling them toward useful ends.⁷⁷ By the "true religion" of nature, the oppressed nation is set free to overthrow the cruel tyrant of a supernatural deity and take its place in the government of the world. By inclination and reason, man participates in nature as part of a chain of being, and thus, in some degree, can help to govern it. He may improve his condition by harmoniously adopting the attributes of God, first by attaining wisdom, knowledge of the causes and

⁷⁷ Franklin makes this argument fully in "Self-Denial Not the Essence of Virtue," Feb. 5, 1734/35, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb. 18, 1734/35, in *PBF*, 2:20, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=019a>.

effects of the natural world. Through wisdom, man gradually attains power and freedom to form new natures, which he puts into motion and governs; he is the only “toolmaking animal,” as Franklin was noted to say.⁷⁸ As man gains wisdom of his own nature and how to attain its ends, he increases in goodness.

Franklin advocated religious sects that he thought best inculcated the necessary virtues for a modern commercial republic. In a letter to Peter Collinson in 1753, he wrote: “I have heard it remarked that the Poor in Protestant Countries on the Continent of Europe, are generally more industrious than those of Popish Countries, may not the more numerous foundations in the latter for the relief of the poor have some effect towards rendering them less provident.”⁷⁹ The end of this virtue of industry, he believed, is freedom, without the modern connotations of regimentation and subordination. An efficient labor force, in the liberal tradition, does not imply docile and subservient workers; on the contrary, it implies a self-governing labor force. Franklin’s first *Poor Richard’s Almanac* in 1733 is dedicated to “Poor Richard, an American Prince without subjects.” In Franklin’s letter to Collinson, human providence comes by wisdom and good laws:

To relieve the misfortunes of our fellow creatures is concurring with the Deity, ’tis Godlike, but if we provide encouragements for Laziness, and supports for Folly, may it not be found fighting against the order of God and Nature, which perhaps has appointed Want and Misery as the proper Punishments for, and Cautions against as well as necessary consequences of Idleness and Extravagancy. . . .

Whenever we attempt to mend the scheme of Providence and to interfere in the Government of the World, we had need be very circumspect lest we do more harm than Good.⁸⁰

Franklin warned of mending providence, or attempting to perfect nature, without wisdom. Such power, without wisdom, is tyrannical—it cannot be just. Franklin wrote to Lord Kames in 1767:

⁷⁸ James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson* (London, 1852), 16, 164. Man’s excellence resides in his artifice, or his ability to order—not conquer—the natural world.

⁷⁹ Franklin to Peter Collinson, May 9, 1753, in *PBF*, 4:480, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=4&page=477a>; Franklin, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind,” in *ibid.*, 4:232, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=4&page=225a>.

⁸⁰ Franklin to Peter Collinson, May 9, 1753, in *ibid.*, 4:480.

The Parliament cannot well and wisely make Laws suited to the Colonies, without being properly and truly informed of their Circumstances, Abilities, Temper, &c. This it cannot be without Representatives from thence. And yet it is fond of this Power, and averse to the only Means of duly acquiring the necessary Knowledge for exercising it, which is desiring to be *omnipotent* without being *omniscient*.⁸¹

As scholars have noted, Franklin's religious teachings are rhetorical. His revolt against God's providence must be led by the higher beings—the heroes—but adopted unknowingly by the rest of humanity. Franklin believed that popular government, which best secured liberty, needed the myth of God's providence. Vulgar citizens, he thought, required the teaching of punishment in the afterlife and tangible rewards in this life as a support to virtue, which leads both to their own comfort and to social and political order.⁸² To accomplish this disparate pedagogy, Franklin publicly and frequently taught God's providence, but in such a way as to habituate citizens to believe in human providence. He constructed myths, such as the "self-made man," that show man as the only providential creature, famously expressed in his moral, "God helps them that help themselves."⁸³

Franklin's own understanding of religion, and his quest for self-perfection, was not that of self-denying asceticism.⁸⁴ He distinguished between his own true worship and "the Praise of the Ignorant or of Children." By religion Franklin meant "there is in all Men something like a natural Principle which enclines them to Devotion." The highest worship, he wrote, consists of gratitude and virtue.⁸⁵ Franklin's worship was the same as that of Epicurus, who rejected providence but worshipped the lesser gods. Bayle concludes:

⁸¹ Franklin to Lord Kames, Feb. 25, 1767, in *ibid.*, 14:69–70, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=14&page=062a>; this same argument is found in a letter to William Shirley, Dec. 4, 1754, in *ibid.* 5:444, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=5&page=443a>.

⁸² Franklin, *Poor Richard Improved, 1757*, in *ibid.*, 7:91, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=7&page=074a>; Franklin to ———, Dec. 13, 1757, in *ibid.*, 7:293; Franklin, *Autobiography*, 164; Bayle, "Epicurus," 2:790nT.

⁸³ Franklin, *Poor Richard, 1736*, in *PBF*, 2:140, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=136a>.

⁸⁴ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 80–90; Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 47; Pangle, *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 16–22; Nian-Sheng Huang, *Benjamin Franklin in American Thought and Culture, 1790–1990* (Philadelphia, 1994), 203–8; Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004), 7–13; Houston, *Franklin and the Politics of Improvement*, 225–29.

⁸⁵ Franklin, "Articles of Belief," in *PBF*, 1:102–3.

We see here, in few words, what Religion *Epicurus* professed: He revered the Gods, because of the Excellence of their Nature, though he neither expected any Good, nor feared any Ill from them. He paid them a free unmercenary Worship, wherein he in no manner regarded his own Interest, but purely the Notions of Reason, which require that we should respect and honour all that is Great and Perfect.⁸⁶

Franklin's worship first consisted of adoration of nature and excellent natures.⁸⁷ Tranquility is attained when one lays aside indignation at a supernatural God for the evil in the world. As God is Reason, not a tyrant who usurps the natural order, injustice is rather understood as the effects of logically ascertainable causes—it is not some incomprehensible evil for which man must yield his reason to belief in an infinite God. The true religion rejects the ingratitude of the metaphysicians and divines, whose prayers are calumniations, for in asserting a providence outside of nature, they covertly accuse God of great evil. Franklin printed several essays in 1735 that charged the divines with profanity, or blaspheming God: “[they] admit of a Sense contrary to Reason and to the Nature and Perfections of the Almighty God, and which Sense has no other Tendency than to represent the great Father of Mercy, the beneficent Creator and Preserver of universal Nature, as arbitrary, unjust and cruel.”⁸⁸ More than God and the universe, the divines blaspheme man, a work of nature who displays the marks of divine reason. The false religion teaches that God violently masters, conquers, and subdues nature. Applied to the moral law, it teaches the extirpation—not cultivation—of natural inclinations.⁸⁹

Atheism, Franklin believed, was rooted in similar ingratitude. Recognizing no order to the universe, it claimed all order was of human creation, not part of nature. Its revolt against nature eroded the basis for both an ordered society, which depended upon religious upbringing, and science—the discovery of permanent truths in ethical and physical

⁸⁶ Bayle, “Epicurus,” 2:780nG.

⁸⁷ Franklin, “Articles of Belief,” 1:103–4; “Opinions and Conjectures,” [July 29, 1750], in *ibid.*, 4:12, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=4&page=009b>.

⁸⁸ Franklin, *Defense of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill's Observations*, in *ibid.*, 2:114; “On a Pertinacious Obstinacy in Opinion,” 1735, in *Benjamin Franklin, Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York, 1987), 255.

⁸⁹ Bayle, “Epicurus,” 2:787nS.

nature. In a letter to dissuade an atheist from publishing his views, Franklin wrote,

But think how great a Proportion of Mankind consists of weak and ignorant Men and Women, and of inexperience'd and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the Motives of Religion to restrain them from Vice, to support their Virtue, and retain them in the Practice of it till it becomes *habitual*, which is the great Point for its Security; And perhaps you are indebted to her originally that is to your Religious Education, for the Habits of Virtue upon which you now justly value yourself.

Only a disordered resentment and ambition, Franklin concluded, would lead one to attack the foundations of his own habit formation: "it is not necessary, as among the Hottentots that a Youth to be receiv'd into the Company of Men, should prove his Manhood by beating his Mother."⁹⁰

Franklin's second act of worship was attaining virtue, meaning the perfection of his nature in the achievement of, as best as possible, happiness. Happiness accompanies virtue, for "without Virtue Man can have no Happiness in this World." He defines happiness as "having a *Sound Mind* and a healthy Body, a Sufficiency of the Necessaries and Conveniences of Life, together with the Favour of God, and the Love of Mankind." A "Sound Mind" is "A Faculty of reasoning justly and truly in searching after [and] discovering such Truths as relate to my Happiness. Which Faculty is the Gift of God, capable of being improv'd by Experience and Instruction, into Wisdom." Wisdom is the perfection a sound mind. As such, one who is wise can "arrive at Perfection in this Life," understanding "the Perfection of any Thing to be only the greatest the Nature of that Thing is capable of," for, as Franklin writes, "different Things have different Degrees of Perfection. . . . An Horse is more perfect than an Oyster yet the Oyster may be a perfect Oyster as well as the Horse a perfect Horse."⁹¹ For those capable—and some humans, like oysters, may not be—wisdom is only possible through self-examination, knowledge of one's own nature, and its perfection, which brings harmony to the soul.⁹²

⁹⁰ Franklin to ———, Dec. 13, 1757, in *PBF*, 7:293.

⁹¹ Franklin, "Proposals and Queries to be Asked the Junto," [1732], in *PBF*, 1:261–62, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=259a>.

⁹² On self-examination see Franklin, *Autobiography*, 151–55; "The Busy-Body, No. 3," in *PBF*, 1:121, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=118a>; *Poor Richard Improved*, 1749, in *ibid.*, 3:342; and "Letter from Father Abraham," in *ibid.*, 8:125.

Franklin becomes tranquil by befriending himself. As a created being, unlike nature, which has always been, he is not responsible for his material imperfections. Contrary to the dogma of original sin, the path to virtue in nature shows nature's good and providential sustenance through human reason.

The demands of society, Franklin thought, will always be in tension with individual tranquility. But what of his political life? It violates the key Epicurean teaching: "DO NOT LIVE IN PUBLICITY!—'Live in retirement!'" The Epicurean Philodemus writes:

If any one were to inquire which influence is of all others the most hostile to friendship and the most productive of enmity, he would find it to be politics, because of the envy of one's rivals, and the ambition natural in those so engaged, and the discord recurring when opposite notions are proposed.⁹³

The political man is animated by the turbulent sentiment of anger and rejects the Epicurean life of pure pleasure. Only anger directed at the injustice of the world leads one to order it by force.⁹⁴ There are explanations other than anger for the turmoil of Franklin's political life. He certainly did not wish to be ruled by someone worse than himself or tyrannized over by moralistic men. Franklin also did not think that pride could be overcome, and he admitted his great ambition. None of this explains, however, why Franklin actively sought out the political life. Scholarship is divided; most argue that Franklin believed it was his religious duty to serve the public and that Franklin himself did not probe too deeply as to why. Because it has been demonstrated that Franklin was an ironic thinker, which by definition reveals the tension between the writer and his society, this answer is unsatisfying—Franklin was not selflessly devoted to the public after the manner of Christian charity. Gordon Wood and Robert Middlekauff have stressed what they find to be underlying personal resentments or loyalties that fed Franklin's political life. According to Lerner, Franklin's indignation went much deeper—to God's unprovidedness; he directed his ire toward the conquest of nature and the relief of man's estate. Not needing religion himself, Franklin used it to

⁹³ John Masson, *Lucretius: Epicurean and Poet* (London, 1907), 351–52; Pierre Bayle, *Miscellaneous Reflections Occasion'd by the Comet which Appear'd in December 1680*, 2 vols. (London, 1708), 2:377.

⁹⁴ Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia*, 98–99.

persuade his readers to devote themselves to this political project. In contrast, Weinberger has argued that Franklin's political life did not disrupt his tranquility because Franklin cared little for the public; politics was a game he played for private benefits. In this view, Franklin took none of his writings on religion or providence seriously; he put on a pious mask to evade the indignation and persecution of moral men. He created the mask because he knew the uses of society: sustenance, the trinkets and baubles of civilized life, and the advantages of status. There is something to all of these arguments, but I would like to supplement them with another explanation.⁹⁵

One of Franklin's parables, "An Arabian Tale" (ca. 1779), in many ways an addendum to "On the Providence of God," sheds some light on his entrance into public life.⁹⁶ In the tale, Franklin describes how "Albumazar, the good magician, retired in his old age" to a mountain top where he "avoided the society of men." There the magician is visited by and converses with "genii and spirits" of the first rank. One evening Albumazar is visited by "Belubel the strong," a giant winged creature whose head rests upon the mountain as if it were a pillow, allowing "his face [to shine] on the tent of Albumazar."⁹⁷ The magician, Franklin writes, "spoke to him with rapturous piety of the wisdom and goodness of the Most High," and Belubel is greatly powerful—thus together they represent the three attributes of God. Albumazar, however, "expressed his wonder at the existence of evil in the world, which he said he could not account for by all the efforts of his reason." Belubel discourages Albumazar from placing such great merit upon his reason, for if Albumazar were to know its origin and its weakness, he would be humiliated.

Displaying the virtue of humility, Albumazar asks Belubel to teach him. Belubel directs him to "contemplate" the order below man, from elephant to oyster, in which there is a gradual diminution of faculties and powers. Contemplation of what is below man reveals the origin of reason

⁹⁵ Robert Middlekauff, *Benjamin Franklin and His Enemies* (Berkeley, CA, 1998), ix–x, 107; Wood, *Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 93, 101–2; see Weinberger's counterargument in *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*, 314–18n27.

⁹⁶ Franklin, "An Arabian Tale," in *PBF*, 31:308, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=31&page=308a>; Arthur Stuart Pitt, "The Sources, Significance, and Date of Franklin's 'An Arabian Tale,'" *PMLA* 57 (1942): 155–68. While Pitt correctly points out the political teaching of the lesson, he confuses it for a proof of a God external to nature (156).

⁹⁷ Exodus 33:9–23.

as an appendage of the faculty of acting, an adaptation of the consciousness of living beings. Our intellect is intended to secure the adaptation of our body to its environment—to think in the realm of matter. Belubel says that man is humiliated by the fact that he is part animal; reason seems debased. Our logic is incapable of grasping the true nature of life—the full meaning of the chain of being—for reason itself is created by the chain of being, in particular circumstances to act on finite things. Because it is only an emanation of life, its attempt to comprehend life itself is like an effect trying to reabsorb its cause. The intellectual molds that man uses to categorize life—such as unity, multiplicity, causality, completion—seem hopeless, for the chain of being is seamless: “There is no gap, but the gradation is complete.” Our reason ever fails to capture our experience.

But reason is not truly debased. Belubel teaches Albumazar that by his humility, the contemplative wizard is higher than most in the chain of being because he knows what others do not know, that there is in ascending from animals a “long gradation of beings,” arriving at “the infinitely Great, Good, and Wise.” These beings “possess powers and faculties of which [Albumazar] *canst yet* have no conception.”⁹⁸ Belubel teaches that human knowledge comes by action. Corresponding to our understanding are powers that are but faintly felt in isolation. These powers will only become clear and distinct when they perceive themselves at work in the progress of man. By the intensified and expanded exercise of these powers man will learn what effect they must make for good. In human industry, reason that is bent upon the particular act to be performed and its reaction touches something of the absolute. Speculation arises when we try to apply the usual forms of our thoughts to objects with which our industry has nothing to do, and for which our intellectual molds are not made. But Albumazar cannot ascend higher because he shuns the active powers of Belubel. His wisdom and goodness are vain because they are separated from human utility in politics and the truths of experience. The attributes of God must be possessed in harmony, and power is one of these attributes.

Franklin viewed civic life as the necessary material for philosophic reflection; he combined the attributes of God, as he defined them, by crafting legislation and the moral virtue that supports the laws. Franklin recognized “solitude [to be] an agreeable refreshment to a busy mind,” but he mocked the isolated philosophers who create metaphysical worlds in

⁹⁸ Franklin, “Arabian Tale,” in *PBF*, 31:308 (my emphasis).

their imaginations. Franklin's social philosophy drew him away from metaphysics to the "Din of the Market."⁹⁹ The periods of his life when he most approached the private life are followed by his return to political affairs.

In Franklin's view, wisdom as an attribute does not exist alone; it is not *ex nihilo* but an amalgamation of natural genius and education. Franklin wrote that a "Sound mind" can be improved into wisdom only by "Experience and Instruction."¹⁰⁰ Philosophy and the sciences are not *sui generis*, but require cultivation. Because civilization only flowers upon a solid political foundation, the first goal of Franklin's education was political and moral, to provide the commonwealth with literate, educated citizens who possess industry and the virtues of the commercial republic. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin defines his two great tasks in public life as the defense of the colony and the establishment of education. His political life secured the liberal education; his love of wisdom led him to aid the education of excellent souls. The great defense of the modern liberal state is that it secures peace for the purpose of philosophic leisure; as Thomas Hobbes had written, "*Leisure* is the mother of *philosophy*; and *Commonwealth*, the mother of *peace* and *leisure*."¹⁰¹ Franklin's political teaching had philosophic implications; as he expressed to David Hartley, "God grant that not only the Love of Liberty but a thorough Knowledge of the Rights of Man may pervade all the Nations of the Earth so that a Philosopher may set his Foot any where on its Surface and say, this is my Country."¹⁰²

Franklin initiated educational reform in America. In 1735 he argued that the leisured sons of farmers in the growing colonies must be the seeds for "*Human Planting*," adding that "the Plants to be raised are more excellent in their Nature, and to bring them to Perfection requires the greater Skill and Wisdom."¹⁰³ In 1743 he drew up a proposal for an academy "for a compleat Education of Youth," and in 1749 he wrote the proposal for Pennsylvania's first college, *Proposals Relating to the Education*

⁹⁹ Franklin, "Journal of a Voyage," in *ibid.*, 1:85–86; Franklin to [Hopkinson?], [Oct. 16, 1746], in *ibid.*, 3:89.

¹⁰⁰ Franklin, "Proposals and Queries to be Asked the Junto," in *ibid.*, 1:261–62.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, 1994), 455.

¹⁰² Franklin to David Hartley, Dec. 4, 1789, in *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth, 10 vols. (New York, 1905–7), 10:72.

¹⁰³ Franklin, "Reply to a Piece of Advice," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Mar. 4, 1734/35, in *PBF*, 2:23, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=2&page=021a>.

of *Youth in Pennsylvania*.¹⁰⁴ He promoted this idea in his *Gazette*, and he solicited subscriptions for the new academy. The board of trustees in 1749 elected Franklin president, a position he held until 1756. He remained a trustee until his death. He writes:

Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation and Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, and Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare and Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing their tender Minds with Principles of Rectitude and Morality, instructing them in the dead and living Languages, particularly their Mother Tongue, and all useful Branches of liberal Arts and Science.¹⁰⁵

Franklin intended his curriculum to direct the most ambitious minds to considerations of justice and moral philosophy. He challenged students to debate their opinions and to defend them in both writing and conversation. In order to defend justice, students must be educated in the “Use of *Logic*, or the Art of Reasoning to *discover* Truth, and of Arguing to *defend* it, and *convince* Adversaries.”¹⁰⁶ Ordered debate in education cultivates in the fertile mind a love of truth and a capacity to persuade others. The College of Pennsylvania educated the city’s influential men, playing a key role in making Philadelphia the leading center of science, literature, and art in the colonies.¹⁰⁷

The highest education Franklin reserved for the friendship of the private philosophical society. He conceived of “a *great and extensive Project*” that would unite philosophy and politics in “an united Party for Virtue.” This party would act from “a View to the Good of Mankind,” free from a factious spirit. Franklin suggested that he lacked the leisure to ever form such a “sect,” but in his description, the great party is a multiplicity of philosophical societies that he encouraged his readers to reproduce.¹⁰⁸ His

¹⁰⁴ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 181–82; “On the Need for an Academy,” *Pennsylvania Gazette* Aug. 24, 1749, in *PBF*, 3:385, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=3&page=385a>; *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1749), in *ibid.*, 3:397, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=3&page=397a>.

¹⁰⁵ Franklin, “Constitutions of the Academy of Philadelphia,” in *ibid.*, 3:421, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=3&page=421a>.

¹⁰⁶ Franklin, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*, in *ibid.*, 3:414.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Potts Cheyney, *History of the University of Pennsylvania, 1740–1940* (Philadelphia, 1977), 125.

¹⁰⁸ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 158, 161; “Observations on Reading History,” [1731], in *PBF*, 1:193, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=192a>.

party for virtue lasts beyond the grave—his notion of immortality—in the readers of his ironic writings, which leave behind his wisdom of the human condition.

Conclusion

In "On the Providence of God," Franklin defends the natural religion he articulated in his 1728 "Articles of Belief." Borrowing from Pierre Bayle's "Epicurus," Franklin first provides a logically concise and ironic argument against a creator of infinite attributes by following the a priori principles that such a God exists to their absurd conclusions. He then argues against the Neoplatonist position that the infinite God creates, or moves nature, from his infinite goodness. Approaching the matter of God given the ethical question of prayer, Franklin argues that the teaching of particular providence is animated by resentment towards man's place in nature. Franklin's ironic conclusion is that there is no God of particular providence but that human agency exists—and that the only form of particular providence is found in human prudence. Abandoning the Epicurean disdain of politics, Franklin's love of philosophy and his desire for transcendence caused him to leave behind a beautiful trace of himself in the existence of the arts and sciences in the cities and nations. He imparted a science of virtue, secured by a strong political regime, which educates and orders young ambitious minds, and this is his greatest glory.

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