

KEVIN SLACK, *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue* (Rochester: Rochester UP, 2017), 305 pp.

This erudite study reconstructs Benjamin Franklin's political philosophy from the rich wealth of his essays written before 1760. Claiming that Franklin's "science of virtue" was fully developed before the process of the American Revolution set in, Slack convincingly demonstrates in an argument moving close to the sources and saturated with textual evidence that the most radically republican of all the American founders indeed was a political theorist in the Whig tradition of natural rights.

Slack's study proceeds in nine chapters that are as rich as they are dense. Chapter 1 shows how Franklin's early thought developing during his first stay in England (1724/25) was fundamentally shaped by the utilitarian ethics born from the political atheism of Bernard Mandeville and Anthony Collins. Denying the superiority of the community over the individual, Franklin conceived of man as a pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding being for whom both virtue and vice were but empty distinctions because he acted on the necessities of his animal nature. Slack represents Franklin's early political philosophy as a hybrid of the doctrines of necessity and political atheism, thus defining all the positions that Franklin overcame in the further development of his thinking about man, society and politics. Chapter 2 traces how Franklin abandoned Mandeville's relativism and amoral necessitarianism already during his voyage back to Philadelphia in 1726, replacing it with a position that held virtue as a necessity for human action and social relationships. Inspired by Shaftsbury's theory of common sense, Franklin began to feature the social nature of man and the function of language, dialogue and conversation as media of information, truth, self-knowledge, and correction. In this context, the concept of virtue as a necessary condition of both individual happiness and social relationships began to move center stage.

Chapter 3 reconstructs Franklin's thinking about religion. It demonstrates how Franklin, rejecting his earlier political atheism, put his emerging "science of virtue" on a religious footing while continuing to reject the idea of a Christian God revealed in Scripture. Embracing a Deistic view of the world, Franklin began to understand virtuous behavior and

a sentiment of gratitude as "acts of religion" in a polytheistic, pagan form of worship that looked into the "Book of Nature" for orientation and guidance. Virtue was seen as a way of rationally ordering one's life, and a virtuous life partook in the divine order of nature that mirrored God's great but impenetrable goodness. Chapter 4 continues this discussion by looking into Franklin's thoughts about providentialism and religion in general. Although he was hostile towards revealed religion, Franklin was convinced of the necessity of religion as a source of ethical conduct in private and in public. Harmonizing religious thinking with reason, Franklin held that man's use of reason and the proper ordering of his soul are exercises of a "true religion" that took the "law of nature" as a measure for moral teachings. Religiosity was thus both public and private virtue that ensured the tranquility of mind, triggered benevolence towards others, and inculcated a sense of unity derived from providential thinking. Chapter 5 analyzes Franklin's "Science of Virtue," his moral philosophy and his investigations into human nature. Accordingly, virtue for Franklin was the source of private and public happiness; it was based on self-love properly understood, not on self-denial. His "Science of Virtue" ably reconstructed here unfolded as the attempt to combine self-interest and public mindedness and to channel private and public virtue to good government and public happiness.

As constant "self-examination" for Franklin was the condition of possibility of virtue and happiness, chapter 6 probes into this matter demonstrating that "self-examination" came in two shapes and forms: individual introspection and the critical view of trusted friends as external observers. Self-examination, as Slack convincingly shows, revealed the multiple selves of a person, revealed his ambitions and passions, and was as such the basis for a systematic and rational self-improvement, the prime aim of which was the acquisition of a habit of humility as the basis for virtuous social conduct. Chapter 7 places Franklin's "Science of Virtue" into the context of the sociology of a free people. As "avarice," "ambition," "pride," and other human "passions" in Franklin's view were obstacles to a life of private and public virtue, passions that potentially could run wild in a free society, his ethic of virtue is preoccupied with channeling "passions" to private morality, public spirit and commitment to the coun-

try. Chapter 8 deals with Franklin's political thought as derived from his moral philosophy of virtue and thereby unearths the theoretical base of his radical republicanism. It discusses Franklin's Whig-theory of rights, and shows how the protection of rights, not popular sovereignty, was his main concern regarding the role and functions of government.

The final chapter 9 reconstructs how Franklin applied his Whig principles of natural rights, social compact theory, and the proper ends of government to colonial politics. With a prime focus on his political actions in Pennsylvania's colonial assembly until the mid-1750s, the chapter demonstrates that Franklin demanded from early on that the colonists be treated as equals and right-bearing subjects of the Crown, not as children or slaves. He was convinced that the colonists, for having worked and cultivated the land, had the right to representative government in their colony, which could not be substituted by 'virtual representation' in England's parliament. This position became manifest in his conflict with the proprietors during the 1750s already, and it was then applied to the imperial conflict with a mother country that was unwilling to treat the colonists as equals and 'Englishmen in America.'

Slack's analysis unfolds as the close reading of a vast number of Franklin's essays, whose line of argumentation is carefully reconstructed and knowledgeably contextualized into the intellectual and political contexts of the age. This ongoing scholarly commentary on Franklin's essays produces a rich wealth of insights into his thought and individual texts. Erudite and rewarding as Slack's study is, its minute reconstruction of Franklin's "Science of Virtue" has a tendency to get lost in the details at the expense of analytical clarity and argumentative stringency.

Still, Slack's systematic treatment of Franklin's ethics of virtue is a valuable book for all scholars interested in Franklin, the Enlightenment, and republican culture in colonial British North America. Much has been written about the functionality of Franklin's ethics of virtue for "economic man" and his commercial pursuits on a free market place. In the light of this study, this appears as an uncalled for reduction of a highly complex "Science of Virtue" that is about "republican man" in a civil society as much as it is about virtue as an end in itself and a manifestation of beauty.

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