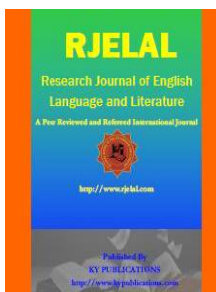




## WAS HE A PRAGMATIC OR A PURITAN?: READING BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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### ABSTRACT

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* prefaces the history of an autonomous and self-determining subject, characterized by independence, authority, and reason while picturing America's pre-revolutionary Puritan era. This paper discusses the inherent traits of Puritanism of the era that he manipulated for his self-improvement and in doing also displayed dominant traits of pragmatic individual.

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Benjamin Franklin's life account is often presented as a surrogate narrative of the history of the America in the epoch in which he lived. His account of modest beginnings – truthfully, but self-consciously re-created by Franklin nearly fifty years later when he began to write his *Autobiography* – has been accepted as the tale of the America's first Horatio Alger.

Rooted in the New England ethos, Benjamin Franklin was indelibly stamped in the Puritan dye yet exempt from Puritan spirituality. In his thoughts and deed he showed possibilities of a secularized and humanized world view" (Conkin 73). A study of his *autobiography* exposes how the Puritan anticipates the pragmatism of such American thinkers like Charles S. Pierce, William James and John Dewey. This paper endeavors to trace the traits of Puritanism and pragmatism in his *autobiography* and finally resolve the surrounding dilemma.

The decline of religious union with God and increasing rationalism and secularity led men to perceive grace as coming from self-discipline. The

decline of religious union with God and increasing rationalism and secularity led men to perceive grace as coming from self-discipline, self-denial and involvement in great works. One has to achieve a rational system for gaining salvation. The Puritan hoped that the system he believed in would help him discover in himself signs of grace. Puritan has been defined by Russel as,

A man who holds certain kinds of acts, even if they have no visible bad effects upon others than the agent, as inherently sinful, and being sinful, ought to be prevented by whatever means is most effectual – the criminal law if possible, and, if not that, then public opinion backed by economic pressure. But originally it reconciled with a utilitarian basis of legislation by the belief that certain crimes roused the anger of the gods against communities which tolerated them, and were therefore socially harmful. (84)

In the instance of a secular man like Franklin one finds that he sought the effects of such religiously

motivated behavior without the religious motivation. He portrays himself as pursuing secular ends for secular reasons, but he cannot be considered irreligious. If he was unaffected by the true meaning of religion, his style of life, learned from his pious Calvinist family in the still religious Boston made him to absorb religious ways and values – usefulness, respect for literacy and rational learning, intelligent practical wisdom and the efficacy of work, self-discipline, self-help, persistence and other virtues of Puritan Yankee.

Though he lacked the religious feeling that prompted the Puritan ancestors to develop a method to achieve “assurance of faith” Franklin developed a similar method to develop a character to achieve success in eighteenth century America. He was aware and respectful of the heritages tending consistently to transform their values in the direction of secular and utilitarian ethos.

The project of writing his autobiography may be regarded as reminder of his education and as an example of early dogmatism emphasized by the very words that describe it. “I wished to live without committing any Fault at anytime; I would conquer all that wither natural Inclination, Custom, or Company might lead me into” (66) says Franklin while describing the grandiose objectives at the time. He derived from his Puritan background, diligence, preoccupation with ethics and a sense of responsibility to an ordered community. But he approached the tradition with “detachment and selectivity”. We find his activities confined to the world of men and he is not involved in any mystical participation in divine being. In the earlier passages of his autobiography there is a reflection of Franklin’s initial optimism in his ability to achieve the desired results and it perhaps reflects his enthusiasm for deistic principles that he describes in the earlier passage of the autobiography. His subsequent account of his failure to reach his goal bespeaks an understanding of human nature in relation to the Divine that owes much more to theology of Calvins and Puritans.

For Franklin true success manifested itself in benevolent and altruistic action. His memoir moves “beyond self-advertisement to assume some of the characteristics of prophetic of autobiography”

by urging “certain values on the entire community to help it achieve its historical destiny” (Cousar 43). It does not communicate a pious and prophetic vision but neither it the self-promotional tract as some have thought it to be. Rather it is closer to a prophetic mode than to its opposite. If Franklin is freed of the religiosity of Puritan Quaker autobiographies and thus does not interpret experience in prophetic ways, he portrays himself as a self-disciplined, self-made man who pursues success and becomes a model American who made possible the Revolution and the continued well-being of the Republic.

In *Autobiography* Franklin seems to be resolve to reform by the simple act of will in which he declares his intention to “conquer” his faults. And thus his progress roughly corresponds to that of the Puritan convert through the stages of “conviction and compunction.” Franklin retains the important Puritan distinction between the roles of understanding and the will. So before any reformation the understanding of the need to reform is a must and this should further after one’s disposition.

Long before Franklin began his *Autobiography*, he composed his epitaph for himself:

The Body of  
B. Franklin  
Printer;  
Like the cover of an Old Book,  
Its contents torn out,  
And script of its Lettering and Gilding  
Lies here, Foods for worms  
But the work shall not be lost.  
For it will, as he believed, appear once  
more  
In a new and perfect edition  
Correct and Amended  
By the Author  
He was born Jan 6, 1706  
Died 17....

Here by ‘Author’, Franklin means God. It was designed to please Puritans. But the statement that “authors have in a second edition to correct some faults of the first” (2) points to something different from what it meant in the epitaph. He assumes the

role previously assigned to God but to create a model of self Self-education. He admits that God makes the rules and occasionally intervenes in the game but Franklin takes the initiative and plays the game.

A similar difference from the Puritan model is found in Franklin's use of the term 'humility.' 'Humility' occupies a position of key importance and is at the apex of the reformation process. Puritans considered humility as the final stage of preparation which leads directly to saving faith. For Franklin humility is apparently the ultimate virtue. It appears last in the list of his virtues. It is a virtue which escaped the initial attention and was suggested to him by his Quaker friend Aber James. This is the virtue last mentioned but he considered it as one of his more useful aids in achieving worldly success.

All through his life, he was an experimenter and displayed the scientific temper in almost every sphere of activity. Recognizing the precariousness of life in 18<sup>th</sup> century Philadelphia and America, Franklin emphasized the need for self-discipline and tight structures to avoid or smooth over conflicts and to advance culture and public affair. So his life story offers a testimony to the usefulness of the thirteen virtues in making one's way comfortably through the difficulties of life. In the interest of the public good individualism should be suppressed.

Franklin makes his way through the world, pragmatically rejecting the old-conundrum whether man does good works because he is saved or saved because he does good work. However industrious and frugal he may in fact have been he knew that for the business of social success virtue counts for nothing without his public dress, "Private virtue might bring one to stand before the King of Kings, but if one wants to sit down and sup with the kings of this world, then one must help them see one's merit" (Lemay 331).

The protestant work ethics influenced Franklin and helped him form his ideas. He is however not the one who seeks the public good only as a way to increase his own wealth. While he did want wealth and was indeed schemer, an arranger, a man of many faces he also enjoyed life as no ascetic adherent to the protestant ethic could, yet he was an enlightened man who wanted to be of

service to the mankind. The ascertainism of Protestant ethic drove him to be useful and not merely rich.

Though Franklin was prophet of American technology, he did not anticipate industrialization. It may be supposed that his response to such urbanizations of fire fighting, poor street lightning and improper sanitary conditions was unconsciously motivated by a patriotic desire to avoid or mitigate the worst evils of urbanization. In his physical inquiry he tried to combine the elaboration of theoretical constructs and the elaboration of experimental activity. His conception of electricity as a flow, with negative and positive forces, helped in the further theoretical development of electromagnetism. On the other hand Franklin's lightning rod, bespoke the extensive practical activities of the type that form the valuable part of laboratory work.

So Franklin's scientific works and views and reflect his pragmatic wisdom in taking theory as a guide to action with ends in view of both increasing our understanding and improving our lot. But this pragmatic wisdom also appears directly in Franklin's view of morality and politics. His morality, like his science, deliberately cuts free of Metaphysics and theology by urging concentration, not on abstract thought or ideal virtue, but on human deed and their consequences in experience for human action, rather than the assumed antecedents of metaphysical, theological or even epistemological premises. "Become", he says, "not virtuous but a little more virtuous than the day before" (Franklin 119). He also recommends a deliberate imaginative calculation of the expected advantages and disadvantages that would accrue from the voluntary choice.

But it is this "bold and arduous project of arriving at moral Perfection" is the most attacked part of the autobiography. Lawrence referred to it and to its thirteen virtues as "Benjamin's barbed wire fence." Leibowitz, following Lawrence's line of interpretation says that, "The last three sections are written by Franklin who is a brilliant curator of his own reputation, as prodigy of virtue" (51). Taking a different stand Robert F. Sayre argues that the

“author of this piece was parading himself as a naïf.” Despite different interpretation Franklin left his indelible mark in the political, social and scientific world of the nation.

In politics, Franklin cared much about liberty and dignity of the common man but he felt that the theories of the state or of the sovereignty or abstract questions of “who should rule” were somewhat like those contentious theological arguments that never issued in resolution but often poisoned the good feeling that would otherwise help in man’s natural development. Regarding education Franklin’s idea was utilitarian and pragmatic. “he wanted subjects and instruction that trained not for immediate goals, not for close bound, predetermined careers, but for the broadest possible range of enterprise” (35) The objective of Franklin’s model of national education is supremely ambiguous—preparing the student for “any Business, Calling or Profession.” The self-education produces the self-made man. He himself was one of the foremost example of this new cultural ideal. Never before a self-educated tradesman conducted negotiations with the first statesman of Europe. There had never been before an individual who has risen to power from humble origins as a result of unique abilities. The educational program, which Franklin set up – in the “Junto,” *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, the Philadelphia Academy Proposal and the *Autobiography*—were designed to produce equivalent of his self-education.

As is clear from the discussion up to this point of time Franklin was the first civilized Puritan and remained a good Puritan. He accepted the Puritan morality and remained a moralist in his approach to life. But he rejected the one of the most basic aspect of Puritanism – the submission and acceptance of God’s will. If somehow a son of the Puritans Franklin grew far beyond the reach of their sermonizing. In so far as he is concerned himself with the consequences rather than principles, he was a pragmatist, but not a pragmatist in the philosophical sense, for he was neither a metaphysician, nor a logician and it is dangerous to describe his mind in terms of any systematic philosophy. He lived rather than formulated his thoughts. So the autobiography points to the

transformation undergone by a moral being who was religiously educated as a Presbyterian in a man of the world whose life has always been a lesson for his posterity despite age, origin, and culture.

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#### Brief bio of Author

**Madhusmita Pati** is presently Associate Professor of English at Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha. She has obtained her Masters Degree from

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Her area of research interest is American autobiography, Indian women autobiography, Diaspora writers and literature and development studies. She has two books and about twenty publications to her credit in Indian as well international journals of repute. Besides she has attended several conferences both in India and the US. She is also the Editor of Ravenshaw Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies since last four years and is also a member of the board of editors for several journals in India and abroad.

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