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The

PURSUIT *of* HAPPINESS

How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America

JEFFREY ROSEN

President and CEO, National Constitution Center

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For my beloved father,

Sidney Rosen,
July 14, 1926–May 19, 2022

"Even as man imagines himself to be, such he is,
and he is also that which he imagines."
—PARACELSUS

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That lack the moderation reason brings
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The soul that's tranquil, calm, restrained, at rest
The happy soul, the subject of our quest

One

ORDER

Twelve Virtues and the Pursuit of Happiness

In his early twenties, Benjamin Franklin recalled, "I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection." He had been reading some of the classical Greek and Roman philosophers—Pythagoras, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Cicero—as well as scanning the popular magazines of the day for self-help advice to print in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. Based on his reading, he had become convinced that the key to self-improvement was daily self-examination. Accordingly, he devised a spiritual accounting system, drafting a list of twelve virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, and—saving the one he found most challenging for last—chastity. Franklin later expanded his list to thirteen by adding another virtue a Quaker friend told him he needed to work on: humility. He resolved each day to run through a checklist of whether or not he had lived up to each virtue, placing a black mark next to the virtue where he had fallen short. Franklin worried that if word got out

about his plan for moral perfection, it might be viewed as "a kind of foppery in morals" that "would make me ridiculous." (Perhaps he imagined the reaction to a book called "*Humility*, by Benjamin Franklin.") Daunted by all the black marks, he eventually abandoned the project. But "on the whole," he concluded, "tho' I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it."[1]

Franklin's conclusion was that "without Virtue Man can have no Happiness in this World."[2] And as the motto for his project, he chose these lines from one of the most widely read books of Stoic self-help philosophy, Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations:*

> O philosophy, guide of life! O searcher out of virtue and exterminator of vice! One day spent well and in accordance with thy precepts is worth an immortality of sin.[3]

Franklin wrote about his virtue project in his autobiography, and it has been widely imitated ever since. It was admired, for example, by Menachem Mendel Lefin, a Ukrainian rabbi who, in 1808, almost twenty years after Franklin's death, published *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, or a *Book of Accounting of the Soul*, introducing Franklin's thirteen virtues to Hebrew readers as the foundation of the Jewish school of Mussar, or character improvement.[4] I came across Lefin's book a few years ago on the recommendation of a rabbi, which led to a brief attempt to practice the Franklin system of daily self-accounting with a friend. (Like Franklin, we found the exercise daunting and soon gave up.)

At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, however, I noticed an unexpected connection I hadn't seen before: Ben Franklin wasn't the only Founder to cite Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* as a key source for the connection between virtue and happiness. In 1815 Amos J. Cook, the head of a boarding school in Maine, wrote to Thomas Jefferson asking him for some wisdom in Latin to enlighten his students. Although

he had no original Latin verses to add, Jefferson wrote, he wanted to offer some "humble prose" from Cicero's advice manual:

> Therefore the man, whoever he is, whose soul is tranquillized by restraint and consistency and who is at peace with himself, so that he neither pines away in distress, nor is broken down by fear, nor consumed with a thirst of longing in pursuit of some ambition, nor maudlin in the exuberance of meaningless eagerness—he is the wise man of whom we are in quest, he is the happy man.[5]

Praising the passage as "a moral morsel, which our young friends under your tuition should keep ever in their eye," Jefferson emphasized to Cook the ancient wisdom of Cicero's philosophy, in words remarkably similar to Franklin's: "[I]f the Wise, be the happy man, as these sages say, he must be virtuous too; for, without virtue, happiness cannot be."[6]

In another uncanny synchronicity, Jefferson, like Franklin, was inspired by *Tusculan Disputations* to draft his own list of twelve virtues—he called them "a dozen cannons of conduct in life"—that he believed were key to the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson's virtues were almost identical to Franklin's, although he conveniently left chastity off his list, given his children with Sally Hemings, all of whom he held, like her, in bondage. And Jefferson, like Franklin, accompanied his list of virtues with practical maxims about how to follow each one, beginning with industry, which Jefferson reduced to the following: "Never put off to tomorrow what you can do to-day."[7] (Franklin's version was "Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.")[8]

Intrigued by the fact that Cicero's now forgotten self-help manual had inspired both Franklin and Jefferson to draft similar lists of twelve virtues for daily living, I decided to read Cicero myself. I then set out to read the other books of ancient wisdom that shaped Jefferson's original understanding of the famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence about "the pursuit of happiness."[9] In 1825, writing to the historian Henry Lee, Jefferson said that the Declaration "was intended to be an

expression of the American mind, resting on the harmonising sentiments of the day," as expressed in conversations, letters, printed essays, and what he called "the elementary books of public right." He named four authors in particular: Aristotle, Cicero, John Locke, and Algernon Sidney.[10] But who were the other philosophers who influenced Jefferson, and which of their books did he consider most valuable?

A reading list that Jefferson first drafted in 1771, five years before he wrote the Declaration, provided an answer. Jefferson sent the list to his friend Robert Skipwith, who had asked for books to include in a private library, and revised it over the years. Under the category of "religion," Jefferson's reading list includes Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, as well as a top ten list of other works of classical and Enlightenment moral philosophy:[11]

1. Locke's *Conduct of the Understanding in the Search of Truth*.
2. Xenophon's memoirs of Socrates, translated by Sarah Fielding.
3. Epictetus, translated by Elizabeth Carter.
4. Marcus Aurelius, translated by Collins.
5. Seneca, translated by Roger L'Estrange.
6. Cicero's Offices, by Guthrie.
7. Cicero's Tusculan questions.
8. Ld. Bolingbroke's Philosophical works.
9. Hume's essays.
10. Ld. Kaim's Natural religion.

During the COVID quarantine, I set out to read these ten books, as well as others on Jefferson's reading list, nearly all of which I had somehow missed. I've had the privilege of a wonderful liberal arts education and have studied literature, history, political philosophy, and law with great teachers at great universities. But despite my elaborate education, I'd never encountered the great works of Greek, Roman, and Enlightenment *moral philosophy* that offered guidance about how to live a good life.

In college, I remember yearning for this kind of guidance. The 1980s were the "Greed is good" decade, and I was looking for an alternative to the unchecked hedonism and materialism celebrated by popular culture. Unconvinced by the rigors of Puritan theology, which I had been studying as an English major, I craved an answer to the question of whether spiritual and moral truth could be obtained by reason rather than revelation, by good works and reflection rather than blind faith. What I didn't realize, because classical moral philosophy had fallen out of the core curriculum, was that this was precisely the question the ancient philosophers had set out to answer. These texts were an essential part of the curriculum of American high school, college, and law students in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, but were no longer considered central to what educated Americans should know by the time I graduated from college and law school. It was this gap in my education that led to my quarantine reading project.

Inspired by Jefferson's daily reading schedule, I got up every morning before sunrise, read a selection from his list, and found myself taking notes on the reading in sonnet form, so that I could easily remember the daily lesson. (This practice seemed unusual, to say the least, until I discovered that many readers in the founding era also wrote poems summarizing the wisdom of these classic texts, including Ben Franklin, Mercy Otis Warren, Phillis Wheatley, Alexander Hamilton, and John Quincy Adams.) I've included some of these sonnets as brief introductions to the chapters that follow, along with ten of the most cited books on Jefferson's reading list in the appendix,[12] in the hope that you may be inspired to work your way through the list yourself.

What I learned in my year of daily reading between March 2020 and March 2021 came as a revelation. Scholars have debated for centuries about which books most influenced Jefferson when he wrote the Declaration, but surprisingly few of them focus on the original meaning of "the pursuit of happiness."[13] The best-known books on the Declaration interpret that phrase as a substitute for the right to own property and make little reference to the influence of the classical authors.[14] But when

I read the books of moral philosophy on Jefferson's reading list, I found that the similarities were far more important than the differences. With the help of electronic word searches, I was surprised to discover that many of the books contain the phrase that appears in the Declaration: "the pursuit of happiness." And many cite the same source for their conclusion about the original meaning of the pursuit of happiness: Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*.

In addition to these surprises, working my way through Jefferson's reading list changed my understanding of the famous phrase. Today we think of happiness as the pursuit of pleasure. But classical and Enlightenment thinkers defined happiness as the pursuit of virtue—as *being* good, rather than *feeling* good. For this reason, the Founders believed that the quest for happiness is a daily practice, requiring mental and spiritual self-discipline, as well as mindfulness and rigorous time management. At its core, the Founders viewed the pursuit of happiness as a lifelong quest for character improvement, where we use our powers of reason to moderate our unproductive emotions so that we can be our best selves and serve others. For the Founders, happiness required the daily cultivation of virtue, which the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith defined as "the temper of mind which constitutes the excellent and praiseworthy character."[15] If you had to sum it up in one sentence, the classical definition of the pursuit of happiness meant being a lifelong learner, with a commitment to practicing the daily habits that lead to character improvement, self-mastery, flourishing, and growth. Understood in these terms, happiness is always something to be pursued rather than obtained—a quest rather than a destination. "The mere search for higher happiness," Cicero wrote, "not merely its actual attainment, is a prize beyond all human wealth or honor or physical pleasure."[16]

Why was Cicero's self-help book such a key text in influencing the Founders' understanding of happiness? Because it offered a popular summary of the core of Stoic philosophy. To achieve freedom, tranquility, and happiness, according to the ancient Stoics, we should stop trying to control external events and instead focus on controlling the only

things that we have the power to control: namely, our own thoughts, desires, emotions, and actions. In this sense, Stoic philosophy has many similarities with the Eastern wisdom traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism. "Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think," said the Buddha in the Dhammapada, emphasizing the need to master our selfish impulses—including envy, arrogance, anger, and the pursuit of short-term pleasure—in order to achieve lasting well-being.[17] The Hindu wisdom literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, sums up a similar teaching on happiness in a phrase often quoted by Mahatma Gandhi: "Renounce and enjoy."[18] In other words, only by renouncing selfish attachments to the results of our actions, only by acting selflessly, can we conquer our ego-based emotions—including anger, fear, and jealousy—live in the present, and "live according to nature," as the Stoics put it, in harmony with the natural laws of the universe.

John Adams was excited to learn that Pythagoras, one of the founders of Greek moral philosophy, was said to have studied with the Hindu masters during his travels in the East,[19] and in his correspondence with Thomas Jefferson at the end of their long lives, Adams discussed the Hindu Vedas as a possible source of the ancient wisdom regarding happiness. For the Founders, the pursuit of happiness included reading in the wisdom traditions of the East and West, always anchored by the canonical text of the Bible, in an attempt to distill their common wisdom about the need to achieve self-mastery through emotional and spiritual self-discipline.

The Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonia*, meaning "good daimon," or good spirit, and the Greek word for virtue is *arete*, which also means "excellence." In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously defined happiness as virtue itself, an "activity of soul in conformity with excellence."[20] These terms are confusing to us, because excellence and virtue aren't self-defining. For this reason, although *eudaimonia* is hard to translate, it might be rendered as "human flourishing," "a purpose-driven life," or, in modern terms, "being your best self." The Latin word for

virtue is "virtus," which also means valor, manliness, excellence, and good character. What Cicero and Franklin called "virtue," therefore, might be translated as "good character." Today, modern social psychologists use terms like "emotional intelligence," which they define as "the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict."[21]

What I also learned from reading Cicero and the other ancient sources is that the Founders framed their quest for self-regulation and emotional intelligence through a psychological lens: the dramatic struggle between reason and passion. The Greek words for reason and emotion are *logos* and *pathos*, so for the Founders, *passion* was a synonym for emotion. The Founders didn't mean we should lack emotion; only that we should manage our emotions in productive ways. Cicero traces the distinction between reason and passion back to Pythagoras, who divided the soul into two parts: the rational and irrational. Pythagoras further divided the irrational parts of the soul into the passions and the desires, leading his disciples to suggest a three-part division of the soul: reason, passion, and desire. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato popularized Pythagoras's three-part division with his metaphor of a charioteer, representing reason, driving a chariot pulled by two horses. One horse, representing the passionate part of the soul, careened toward earthly pleasures; the other, representing the noble or intelligent part of the soul, inclined upward toward the divine. The goal of the charioteer was to use reason to align the noble and passionate horses so that both pulled in the same direction.[22]

In his writings on happiness, Plato argued that we should use our faculty of reason, located in the head, to moderate and temper our faculties of passion, located near the heart, and appetite, in the stomach. When all three faculties of the soul were in harmony, Plato maintained, the state that resulted was called "temperance," but, as Adam Smith noted, it might be better translated as "good temper, or sobriety and moderation of mind."[23] (The Latin word "temperentia," or temperance,

also means good temper, sobriety, and self-control; therefore, for the classical writers, virtue, or good character, was synonymous with temperance, or self-control.) Plato's theory of the harmony of the soul became the basis for the "faculty psychology" that was developed by Enlightenment philosophers such as Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century and that was at the core of the Founders' education. Faculty psychology held that the mind is separated into different mental powers, or faculties, including the intellect, the emotion, and the will. According to this view, the goal of education was to strengthen the intellect, or reason, so that it could moderate and control the will and the emotions in order to achieve the self-control that was key to happiness. Faculty psychology drew on Cicero's idea that we are born with certain innate faculties, including a moral sense, that could aid our powers of reason in calming our emotions. "[W]e must keep ourselves free from every disturbing emotion," Cicero wrote in his treatise *On Duties*, "not only from desire and fear, but also from excessive pain and pleasure, and from anger, so that we may enjoy that calm of soul and freedom from care."

In their private letters and diaries, public speeches and poems, the Founders talked constantly about their own struggles to control their tempers and to be their best selves by using reason to regulate their selfish passions. "Men are rather reasoning tha[n] reasonable animals, for the most part governed by the impulse of passion," Alexander Hamilton wrote in 1802.[24] John Adams's wife, Abigail, gave similar advice to their son, John Quincy Adams. "The due Government of the passions has been considered in all ages as a most valuable acquisition," she warned,"[25] emphasizing in particular the importance of subduing "the passion of Anger." Her conclusion: "Having once obtained this self government you will find a foundation laid for happiness to yourself and usefullness to Mankind."[26]

Nearer to our time, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg told me that her mother gave her precisely the same Stoic advice. "[E]motions like anger, remorse, and jealousy are not productive," she said. "They will not accomplish anything, so you must keep them under control."[27]

Ben Franklin summed up the classical understanding of happiness as a balance between reason and passion in his 1735 essay "On True Happiness." "The desire of happiness in general is so natural to us, that all the world are in pursuit of it," he wrote in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. "Reason represents things to us not only as they are at present, but as they are in their whole nature and tendency; passion only regards them in the former light." Franklin concluded that we need to use our powers of reason to check our immediate emotions and desires so that we can achieve the harmony of the soul that allows us to flourish, emphasizing that "all true happiness, as all that is truly beautiful, can only result from order."

In his virtues project, Franklin defined *order* in terms of impulse control: "Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time." And, in emphasizing the importance of delaying short-term gratification for long-term character improvement, Franklin was summarizing the essence of the ancient wisdom. The classical authorities viewed the pursuit of happiness as a daily version of the famous marshmallow test, an experiment on delayed gratification conducted at Stanford in 1972. Researchers gave the subjects, who were children, a choice between one immediate reward (such as a marshmallow) or two rewards for those who could wait fifteen minutes to receive them. The study found that children who were able to wait for two marshmallows rather than eating one immediately performed better in school years later and had better life outcomes.

Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, is the leading source for how words were understood in the founding era. Johnson notes an older definition of *happiness* as "good luck or fortune," stemming from the Old English word *hap*. But his principal definition of happiness is "Felicity; state in which the desires are satisfied."[28] To illustrate the definition, Johnson cites a text that also appears in Franklin's autobiography and on Jefferson's reading list: namely, John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Johnson's selection comes from book 2, chapter 21, "Of Power," which repeatedly

uses the phrase "pursuit of happiness."[29] And Locke's point, which he takes from Cicero, is that we should control our desires through calm deliberation so that we come to realize that our true and substantial happiness will best be served by long-term self-regulation rather than short-term gratification.

In the course of working my way through Thomas Jefferson's reading list, I discovered that, throughout American history, the meaning of the pursuit of happiness has evolved in unexpected ways. The ancient wisdom that defined happiness as self-mastery, emotional self-regulation, tranquility of mind, and the quest for self-improvement was distilled in the works of Cicero, summed up by Franklin in his thirteen virtues, and used by Adams in his "Thoughts on Government." After Jefferson inscribed the idea in the Declaration of Independence, it showed up in *The Federalist Papers*, the essays Madison and Hamilton wrote in support of the Constitution, focusing on the promotion of public happiness. It was evoked by Presidents John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln, as well as by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, to defend the ideal of self-reliance and to advocate for the destruction of slavery. It became the basis of Alexis de Tocqueville's idea of "self-interest properly understood" and of Justice Louis Brandeis's idea of freedom of conscience. The ancient wisdom fell out of fashion in the 1960s and in the "Me Decade" that followed, however, when our understanding about the pursuit of happiness was transformed from being good to feeling good. But the classical ideal of happiness was resurrected and confirmed in the 1990s by insights from social psychology and cognitive behavior therapy, which found that we can best achieve emotional intelligence by developing habits of emotional self-regulation—training ourselves to turn negative thoughts and emotions into positive ones—through the power of the imagination.

After reading the books that shaped the Founders' original understanding of the pursuit of happiness, I set out to explore how they applied the ancient wisdom in their own lives. What I learned changed the way I

thought about the psychology of the Founders and, in particular, about their use of time. The Founders talked incessantly about their struggles for self-improvement and their efforts to regulate their anxieties, emotions, and perturbations of the mind. They tried to calm their anxieties through the daily practice of the habits of mindfulness and time management. Aristotle said that good character comes from the cultivation of habits, and it's remarkable how much time and energy many of the leading members of the founding generation devoted to their own lifelong quests to practice the habits that would improve their character. They took seriously the Pythagorean injunction to use every hour of the day to cultivate their minds and bodies. They created disciplined schedules for reading, writing, and exercise, and they kept daily accounts of their successes and failures in living up to the ideals they found in the books of ancient wisdom, trying to use each moment productively by living in the present with calm but intense purpose and focus. The Founders may not have meditated, but they practiced the habits of mindfulness.

At times, of course, the Founders shamefully betrayed the moral ideals they set for themselves. Some of them spent their lives as enslavers and notoriously denied the humanity, equality, and inalienable rights of those they enslaved. At least some of the enslaving Founders were aware of their own hypocrisies. Jefferson and other enslavers from Virginia recognized that it was craven greed—following Cicero, they called it avarice—that kept them from freeing those they held in bondage, even as they called for the "total emancipation" of all enslaved people in the future. In other words, they denounced slavery as a violation of the self-evident truth that all men (by which they meant all individuals) are created equal, but in their more self-aware moments acknowledged that they were too dependent on the lifestyle slavery afforded them to consider the consequences of giving it up.

In March 1775, weeks before war broke out at Lexington and Concord, Thomas Jefferson listened as the Virginia delegate Patrick Henry urged the Second Virginia Convention to send troops to support the Revolution. In his famous "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech,

Henry quoted Joseph Addison's play *Cato: A Tragedy* about the need to choose freedom over slavery. "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" he asked. "Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"[30] How could Henry justify urging white Americans to throw off what he called the chains of British slavery while he himself continued to enslave Black Americans? He didn't even try. Henry considered it "amazing" that he and his fellow Americans, who were so "fond of Liberty," also allowed slavery, a practice "as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible and destructive to liberty." And Henry admitted that it was avarice that made him choose not to follow his moral principles: "Would any one believe that I am Master of Slaves of my own purchase!" Henry asked. "I am drawn along by [the] general inconvenience of living without them. I will not—I cannot justify it."[31]

In addition to changing the way I thought about the Founders, my reading also changed the way I thought about how to be a good citizen. Following the classical and Enlightenment philosophers, the Founders believed that *personal* self-government was necessary for *political* self-government. In their view, the key to a healthy republic begins with how we address our own flaws and commit to becoming better citizens over time. In *The Federalist Papers*, Madison and Hamilton made clear that the Constitution was designed to foster deliberation so that citizens could avoid retreating into the angry mobs and partisan factions that can be inflamed by demagogues. Ancient Athens had fallen because the demagogue Cleon had seduced the Athenian assembly into continuing the war with the Peloponnesian League; Rome had fallen because the people were corrupted by Caesar, who offered them luxury in exchange for liberty. Only by governing their selfish emotions as individuals could citizens avoid degenerating into selfish factions that threatened the common good. The way for citizens to create a more perfect union, the Founders insisted, was to govern themselves in

private as well as in public, cultivating the same personal deliberation, moderation, and harmony in our own minds that we strive to maintain in the constitution of the state. Madison would have urged us to think more and tweet less.

In this sense, the Founders believed that the pursuit of happiness regards freedom not as boundless liberty to do whatever feels good in the moment but as bounded liberty to make wise choices that will help us best develop our capacities and talents over the course of our lives. They believed that the pursuit of happiness includes responsibilities as well as rights—the responsibility to limit ourselves, restrain ourselves, and master ourselves, so that we achieve the wisdom and harmony that are necessary for true freedom.

"Obviously freedom must carry with it the meaning of freedom to limit oneself," the composer Leonard Bernstein said of Beethoven's choice of a single note in his *Eroica* Symphony. "Freedom is not infinite, not boundless liberty, as some hippies like to think—do anything you want, anytime, anywhere you want to. No, freedom isn't that. It means being free to make decisions, to determine one's own course." Bernstein went on to connect Beethoven's struggle to balance freedom and harmony in the symphony with the same freedom of citizens to govern themselves in a democracy. "In Beethoven, as in democracy, freedom is a discipline, combining the right to choose freely, with the gift of choosing wisely."[32]

Citing Cicero's famous analogy between "harmony in song" and "concord in the State," John Adams, too, compared the harmony of a well-tempered state constitution to the harmony of a well-tempered orchestra.[33] "As the treble, the tenor, and the bass exist in nature, they will be heard in the concert," Adams wrote in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. "[I]f they are arranged by Handel, in a skilful composition, they produce rapture the most exquisite that harmony can excite; but if they are confused together, without order, they will 'Rend with tremendous sound your ears asunder.'"[34] This was the classical understanding of the pursuit of happiness: the freedom

to make daily choices about how to balance emotion and reason that lead to truth, order, harmony, and wisdom, aligned with the divine will or the natural harmonies of the universe. The Founders understood the importance of our spiritual nature, and for many of them, the pursuit of happiness was a spiritual quest.

This book is an attempt to travel into the minds of the Founders, to understand their quest for the good life on their own terms. By reading the books they read and following their own daily attempts at self-accounting, we can better understand the largely forgotten core of their moral and political philosophy: that moderating emotions is the secret of tranquility of mind; that tranquility of mind is the secret of happiness; that daily habits are the secret of self-improvement; and that personal self-government is the secret of political self-government. It's not a surprise that the Founders often fell short of their own ideals of moral perfection. But what is a surprise is the seriousness with which they took the quest, on a daily basis, to become more perfect. In his autobiography, Franklin called the great moral errors of his life "errata," or printers' errors.[35] And he remained hopeful, as he wrote in an epitaph he drafted for himself, that life was like a manuscript whose errors, in a "new & more perfect edition," could always be "Corrected and amended By the Author."[36]

Notes on Plato's *Phaedrus*

Our souls are forged of three-part composite
A charioteer and pair of winged steeds
One horse is noble temper's reposit
The other, seeking pleasure, passion leads

The driver's task: both horses to align
Transporting soul to immortal realm of truth
The noble steed soars up to the divine
The vain and haughty steed careens to earth

Approaching love, the chariot gyrates
The shameless steed propelled by fierce desire
The driver pulls his reins and remonstrates
The lovers meet in reason's sacred fire

When temperance tames passion's base alloys
Two lovers merge in happy equipoise

Two

TEMPERANCE

Ben Franklin's Quest for Moral Perfection

At the age of seventy-nine, Ben Franklin attributed the "constant felicity of his life" to his daily practice of the classical virtues:

> To Temperance he ascribes his long-continued health, and what is still left to him of a good constitution; to Industry and Frugality, the early easiness of his circumstances and acquisition of his fortune, with all that knowledge that enabled him to be a useful citizen, and obtained for him some degree of reputation among the learned; to Sincerity and Justice, the confidence of his country, and the honorable employs it conferred upon him; and to the joint influence of the whole mass of virtues, even in the imperfect state he was able to acquire them, all that evenness of temper, and that cheerfulness in conversation, which makes his company still sought for and agreeable even to his younger acquaintances.[1]

It's remarkable that Franklin attributed the happiness of his long life to his "evenness of temper" rather than his public accomplishments. For at the time, he had become one of the most famous men on the planet. When he met Voltaire in Paris in 1778, the French hailed him as "the illustrious and wise Franklin, the man of all America most to be respected."[2] His electric rod brought lightning from the heavens, his charting of the Gulf Stream changed the course of international travel, and his experiments with fire warmed homes around the world. In his adopted city of Philadelphia, his influence continues to be felt from block to block in the range of institutions he created, all within walking distance of one another: the Library Company, the American Philosophical Society, the University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Hospital, and the Union Fire Company, known as Franklin's "bucket brigade." As if this wasn't enough, he was America's leading diplomat and practical politician, whose conciliating temper proved to be crucial in the drafting of both the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.

Franklin conducted his first electricity experiments in 1752, the same year he drafted a plan of union for the colonies to pursue common policies for security and defense. During nearly twenty years in London, as an agent for Pennsylvania and other colonies, he invented the glass armonica and urged the repeal of the Stamp Act, the British tax on American newspapers that helped to spark the Revolution. Returning to America in 1775 after being hauled before Parliament for leaking letters about the agitation in Massachusetts, he was elected postmaster general and then served on the committee of five that drafted the Declaration of Independence. After the British defeat at Yorktown in 1781, he returned to Europe, where he negotiated the peace treaty with England, served as America's first ambassador to France, and invented bifocals. Returning to the United States in 1785, he served as president of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council and as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and also found time to invent the mechanical "long arm" for removing books from shelves. Before he died in 1790 at the age of eighty-four, he became president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

Of course, Franklin's self-accounting at the end of his life is necessarily selective. Although he acknowledges the "imperfect state" in which he achieved the classical virtues, he doesn't dwell on those that he famously failed to achieve—in particular, chastity. He fathered an illegitimate son, William, while he was courting Deborah Read, who became his common-law wife. He then all but abandoned Deborah, who remained in Philadelphia during his long diplomatic stints in London and Paris, where he at least flirted with a succession of young admirers. Order was another challenge for Franklin: John Adams was shocked by his colleague's disorganized schedule when they served as peace commissioners in Paris. And Franklin's clashes with Adams, even if they were provoked mostly by Adams's envy, suggest that Franklin's efforts to achieve humility remained a work in progress. Still, Franklin's "evenness of temper" makes him the most relatable Founder: he acknowledged the limits of his own wisdom and remained until the end of his life willing to change his mind—most notably about slavery, which he had initially tolerated but came to oppose. In this sense, Franklin deployed his youthful lessons in self-control, temperance, and emotional intelligence to remain a lifelong learner, disarming conflicts through humor, not seeking sole credit, and always acknowledging the legitimacy of other points of view while recognizing the limits of his own.

Franklin's conciliating temperament came in part from his parents. His father, Josiah Franklin, an artisan and silk dyer, was a Presbyterian Whig dissenter who, in 1683, fled political and religious oppression in England under the Catholic-leaning monarchy of Charles II for America and liberty. In his memoirs, Franklin described his father as a "mechanical genius" whose "great excellence lay in a sound understanding and solid judgment in prudential matters" and who was "frequently chosen an arbitrator between contending parties."[3] His mother, Abiah, was said to have been a "very sensible woman" who taught him practical habits of self-control in daily life. For example, when a female relative gave Franklin unexpected spending money, and he used all of it to buy a whistle from a street vendor, Abiah explained to her son that he could have bought twenty for the

price and advised him that, whenever he wanted anything in the future, he should ask himself, "[H]ow much is the whistle worth?" Franklin told the French physiologist Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis that he never forgot the lesson and, since then, had never entertained a violent passion ("violent désir") for anything without repeating it to himself.[4]

But Franklin also attributed his even temper to his attempt in his twenties to practice the classical virtues. He found the task more difficult than he had imagined because the classical philosophers disagreed about how to define the virtues in question. "Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition." Franklin proposed, for the sake of clarity, to list more virtues, with fewer ideas attached to each, and initially came up with his list of twelve:

1. Temperance
   Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. Silence
   Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. Order
   Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. Resolution
   Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. Frugality
   Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. Industry
   Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.

7. Sincerity
   Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. Justice
   Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. Moderation
   Avoid extreams; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. Cleanliness
    Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, cloaths, or habitation.
11. Tranquillity
    Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity
    Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.[5]

When a Quaker friend informed him that people thought of him as proud and overbearing, Franklin realized that he had neglected an important virtue. Accordingly, he wrote, "I added *Humility* to my list," along with the two most inspiring models of perfection he could imagine:

13. Humility
    Imitate Jesus and Socrates.[6]

Always practical, Franklin decided to focus on improving one virtue a week for thirteen weeks, to avoid distracting himself with multitasking. He made a little self-accounting book, and on each page, he drew a grid with seven vertical columns—one for each day of the week. These were crossed by thirteen horizontal columns—one for each virtue. Each night,

FORM OF THE PAGES.

TEMPERANCE.

Eat not to dulness : drink not to elevation.

	Sun.	M.	T.	W.	Th.	F.	S.
Tem.							
Sil.	*	*		*		*	
Ord.	*	*			*	*	*
Res.		*				*	
Fru.		*				*	
Ind.			*				
Sinc.							
Jus.							
Mod.							
Clea.							
Tran.							
Chas.							
Hum.							

I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every the least offence against *Temperance ;* leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first

he resolved to put a "little black spot" in the daily box allotted to the virtue he was focusing on, if he decided he had fallen short of it.[7]

Franklin decided to begin with temperance, "as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up." Then he planned to move on to silence—in order to develop listening skills and to break his habit of "prattling, punning, and joking," which got him into trouble in social conversation. Next came order, which he "expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies." In the spirit of order, he created an hourly schedule for maximum productivity:

5:00 to 7:00 a.m., rise, breakfast, and focus on the resolution of the day.
8:00 to 11:00 a.m., work.
Noon to 1:00 p.m., read, dine, and review accounts.
2:00 to 5:00 p.m., work.
6:00 to 9:00 p.m., put things in their place, supper, music, diversion, conversation, examination of the day.
10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., sleep.[8]

Franklin soon found that his twenty-four-hour plan for maintaining order tripped him up. It might be practical to use every hour productively when he was master of his own time as a journeyman printer, but he could hardly keep up his schedule of work and reflection when he had to report to a boss, mix in the world, and receive business clients on their own schedules. He also found it hard to acquire order "with regard to places for things, papers, etc.," owing to his early habits of being disorganized. He made so little progress in improving his organizational skills that he eventually gave up.[9]

Even after he abandoned his daily self-accounting, Franklin continued in his twenties to devise practical projects to help him and his friends practice the classical virtues. In 1727, he recalled in his *Autobiography*, he formed a "club of mutual improvement which we called the Junto." (The

word means "to join.") The rules he drafted "required that every member in his turn should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss'd by the company."[10] Franklin's standing queries for the Junto included: "What unhappy effects of intemperance have you lately observed or heard? of imprudence? of passion? or of any other vice or folly?" "What happy effects of temperance? of prudence? of moderation? or of any other virtue?"[11] Franklin took these questions almost word for word from an essay by John Locke (which he neglected to cite) proposing the "Rules of a Society," where members would meet once a week "for their improvement in useful knowledge, and for the promoting of truth and christian charity."[12]

Franklin hoped that the model for the Junto would spread, convincing young men to form local chapters for the practice and promotion of virtue. He proposed that members of the Junto and its spinoffs would eventually be known as "*The Society of the Free and Easy:* free, as being, by the general practice and habit of the virtues free from the dominion of vice; and particularly by the practice of industry and frugality, free from debt."[13] He also conceived of what he called a "*great and extensive project* that required the whole man to execute"—namely, the formation of "a United Party for Virtue" that would bring together the "virtuous and good men of all nations into a regular body, to be govern'd by suitable good and wise rules." Franklin proposed to write a practical self-help book called *The Art of Virtue*, which would have "shown the means and manner of obtaining virtue" through daily practice, demonstrating that it was in "every one's interest to be virtuous who wish'd to be happy even in this world."

What books in particular focused Franklin on the connection between the pursuit of virtue and the pursuit of happiness? The memoir of Franklin's friend George Cabanis provides the most extensive testimony reflecting Franklin's own account of the books he found most influential in his youth. "Before he left his father's home, he happened on a few volumes by Plutarch," an ancient Roman biographer who chronicled