

Plan for Attaining Moral Perfection

Benjamin Franklin (1790)

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous was not sufficient to prevent our slipping, and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I met in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. 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. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts were:

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 employed 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 extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. Cleanliness
Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, 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 dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.

13. Humility

Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

My intention being to acquire the *habitude* of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time, and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone thro' the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arranged them with that view, as they stand above. Temperance first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, Silence would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave *Silence* the second place. This and the next, *Order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. Resolution, once because habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues; *Frugality* and Industry, freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of Sincerity and Justice, etc., Conceiving, then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Garden Verses, daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I ruled each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I crossed these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

Form of the Pages

TEMPERANCE.							
<i>Eat Not to Dulness; Drink not to Elevation.</i>							
	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
T							
S	**	*		*		*	
O	*	*	*		*	*	*
R			*			*	
F		*			*		
I			*				
S							
J							
M							
Cl.							
T							
Ch							
H							

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 offense against *Temperance*, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I supposed the habit of that virtue so much strengthened, and its opposite weakened, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go thro' a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a years. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his

reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and, having accomplished the first, proceeds to a second, so I should have, I hoped, the encouraging pleasure of seeing on my pages the progress I made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots, till in the end, by a number of courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination.

<http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/autobiography/page38.htm>

<http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/autobiography/page39.htm>