

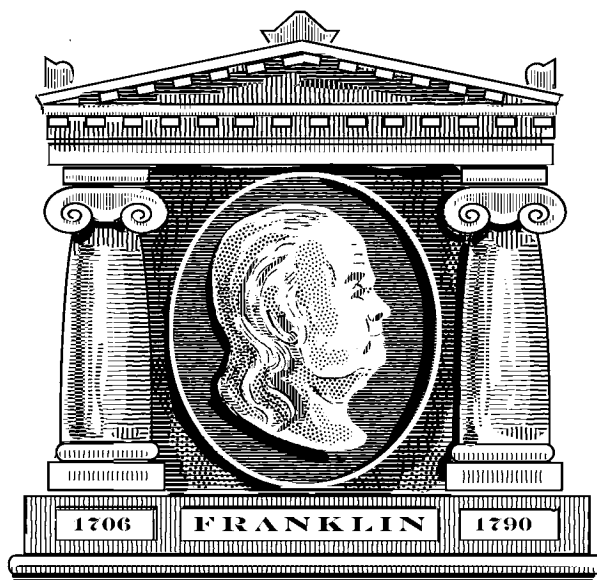
A Bright and Active Boy

The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin, by Lorraine Smith Pangle.
Johns Hopkins University Press, 277 pages, \$45 (cloth), \$20.95 (paper)

IN *THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF BENJAMIN Franklin*, Lorraine Pangle presents such a learned, wise, and well-written account of her subject's thought (it really covers, necessarily, more than just his political ideas) that her book easily stands out among the recent spate of Franklin studies. She lucidly explains his key insights and ably compares these with "the great project of modern, rationalist political theory that stretches back to Hobbes, Bacon, and Spinoza," which she believes "attained its fulfillment in the American founding."

For Pangle, an associate professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin, Franklin's philosophy can best be understood by answering the question "what forms the mind of the bright and active boy?" that he described so well in his famous autobiography. His ethics came from the precepts his father taught him about leading a good, honest, and useful life, and from the powerfully prescriptive Puritan culture of early 18th century Boston. Sixteen-year-old Franklin used his earliest persona, "Silence Dogood" (mocking Cotton Mather, author of *Essays to do Good*), to set forth political ideas he would espouse for the rest of his life: freedom of expression, religious hypocrisy's harmful social effects, and the argument, as Pangle puts it, that "the impulse to be helpful cannot be wholly explained by self-interest, for man is a social being with a natural capacity for empathy."

The book explains the development of Franklin's thought as a product of his active life. He moved in a pattern timelessly expressed in the central proposition of Confucian political thinking (of which Franklin himself was probably aware): "If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character; if there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home; if there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation; if there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world." As good character and habits led to his harmony-building civic career in Philadelphia, Franklin developed what Pangle terms "the heart of his political vision," namely "a view of democratic citizenship, a rich and subtle understanding of the habits and qualities of the heart and mind that need to be fostered in or-



der to sustain liberty and...support the way of life best suited to human happiness altogether." She finds that Franklin "almost instinctively...grasped" the point later expressed by Tocqueville: for a democratic polity to work well it is necessary to "multiply infinitely the occasions for citizens to act together and to make them feel every day that they depend on one another."

IN SUPERB SECTIONS ON THE ALBANY PLAN of Union, the struggles to secure self-government for Pennsylvania from British authorities, the Declaration of Independence, and the framing of the Constitution, Pangle shows how Franklin moved naturally and effectively from harmonious civic action to seeking order (frames of government) in the state and nation, working ultimately for peace in the world. She concedes that Franklin was not much of a systematic or innovative political philosopher, faulting him for seeming "shallow and untheoretical" compared to Socrates and Plato. Nor did he avoid contradictions in his thought; but he was well-grounded in basic democratic principles (though he remained ambivalent about natural rights), had a keen sense of the needs of the ordinary people among whom he lived, and possessed a skill and cleverness of expression that make him one of the supreme political communicators of all time.

Pangle confronts Franklin's many critics who have had little patience for the down-to-earth, pragmatic nature of his thought. She admits

that Franklin "extols hard work and the accumulation of money," but contrary to Max Weber, for whom Franklin was the "prime example of the capitalist outlook," Pangle finds that he did not believe in making money as an end in itself. Rather, he agreed with

the early modern political philosophers [that] the unleashing of acquisitive energies is a praiseworthy project because it contributes to the common good of society, generating employment, enhancing security, multiplying pleasures, and drawing energies away from deadly religious quarrels and military adventurism into more constructive channels.

He showed how Thomas Jefferson's model of democratic citizenship grounded in pastoral life could be extended to city life where the same civic values of thrift, honesty, and hard work could be cultivated. Franklin served as his own best example, retiring from business at age 42 to devote the rest of his life to the study and practice of science, and to politics at the local, state, national, and international levels. His insights into the harmonious relation between citizenship and middle-class virtue is evident in Pangle's sensible accounts of his views on immigration, race, and slavery.

Altogether, then, she gives us a Franklin who stands with the best thinkers and actors of the founding era, a man who fashioned an understanding of self-government, a concept of democratic citizenship, and a humane worldview that have served the country well in the more than two centuries since his death. Of course, the book's most winning feature may be its frequent quotations from Franklin's own cogent, witty writing. Even the author acknowledges that "for making this book such an enjoyable one to research I can only thank Ben himself." But for giving readers one of the very finest introductions to this remarkable American's thought, we must thank Lorraine Pangle.

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