CHAPTER 1

Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: The Story of a Successful Social Animal

Presented by its author and regarded by generations of readers as a pattern of the successful life, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* illustrates critically important adaptive goals and strategies. It is the story of an individual, rooted in a specific time and place, wrestling with universal human problems. Though very much a man of his own time, Franklin convincingly presents himself as a man for all times. His extraordinary career depends on his ability to assess his eighteenth-century colonial environment perceptively, responding in a canny way to its expectations and opportunities. Beginning with the assumption that wealth and status are objectives motivating much human striving, he offers readers a step-by-step account of the methods he used to acquire "Affluence" and "Reputation."[1] Though focusing thus on his own individual interests, he demonstrates that his personal goals can be achieved only within the framework of a human community. In his optimistically prosocial model of human life, then, distinctions between selfishness and altruism tend to blur. As he presents himself—and in this respect it is impossible to disagree with him—Franklin is a highly effective social animal. He deploys the principle of reciprocal altruism with intuitive insight and practiced skill; he negotiates the intricacies of dominance hierarchies with the utmost shrewdness; he identifies cooperation as a crucial component of his success, repeatedly discovering for readers' benefit that self-interest and collective well-being are inextricably intertwined.

Like any piece of autobiographical writing, Franklin's book represents a "dramatization and selective ordering of the varied materials" of its author's experience: it is, as one of his biographers has observed, "an elaborate fabrication, truthful in its details yet subtly misleading in its overall plan." All memoirists necessarily "project a pattern on their recollections" and hence

1 Benjamin Franklin, "The Autobiography," in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York and London: Norton, 1986), 1. All citations refer to this edition.

"distort the lives they describe."[2] Indeed, autobiography exercises a special fascination precisely because it offers more than description: analytical and evaluative commentary accompanies the chronicling of events. J. A. Leo Lemay, one of Franklin's most discerning readers, calls his book "a major literary achievement, more complex, and in many ways, more artful, than a beautifully constructed novel."[3] Like other literary artists, Franklin is "trying to make sense of the world, to construct usable models."[4] It would be possible to undertake biosocial examination of his life *as lived*, with results almost certainly different, at least in some respects, from those that emerge from this examination of his life *as written*. Indeed, most twentieth-century discussions of the *Autobiography* note factual inconsistencies between the life and the book. Francis Jennings, for instance, offers a detailed and "strongly revisionist" analysis of Franklin's personal history.[5] The discussion that follows treats the *Autobiography* as a product of conscious design and interpretative intent: it is a vehicle for conveying its author's conceptions of human nature and social community. Discrepancies between auctorial assertion and ascertainable fact (whether caused by omission or embellishment) need not hamper consideration of the evolutionary issues raised, directly or indirectly, in the version of his life Franklin deliberately shaped for "Posterity" (1).

Never denigrating, disguising or disowning his ambitions, Franklin expends no energy on self-justification. He does not pretend, for instance, that the wealth and status he achieves are unsought, or mere by-products of intellectual, ethical, or spiritual questing; he presents them, rather, as deliberately formulated and unquestionably worthy ends.[6] He acknowledges no disadvantages to being rich and powerful, and he takes uncomplicated pride in having become so. The adaptive value of material prosperity and social status has been demonstrated repeatedly by sociological and anthropological

2 Ormond Seavey, *Becoming Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and the Life* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 7, 8.

3 J. A. Leo Lemay, Franklin's *Autobiography* and the American Dream," in *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism,* ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York and London: Norton, 1986), 349.

4 Joseph Carroll, "Wilson's *Consilience* and Literary Study," in *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 81.

5 Francis Jennings, *Benjamin Franklin: Politician* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), 204.

6 Seavey points out that Franklin's unquestioning endorsement of wealth-building reflects attitudes generally prevalent in his time period: "traditional criticisms of avarice and of the sordidness of trade were muted in the eighteenth century as never before or since. Trucking and bartering were not merely inevitable but laudable." *Becoming,* 36.

research.[7] Resources are obviously an essential component in the successful rearing of human offspring, who undergo a long period of dependency and require instruction in a host of skills, often complex, that will enable them to survive in their physical and social worlds. In consequence, as David M. Buss observes, "the evolution of the female preference for males who offer resources may be the most ancient and pervasive basis for female choice in the animal kingdom."[8] Because access to goods and services depends to a considerable extent upon status, furthermore, a quest for dominance tends to go hand-in-hand with efforts to accumulate wealth. Women seeking mates respond to the current community standing, and probable future status, of potential partners as well as to resources on hand, seeking men who manifest "a strong proclivity to ascend the hierarchy of tribal power and influence."[9] Such men are likely to exercise economic control in their social groups and thus prove able to provision offspring and long-term mates exceptionally well.

In describing his ambition to achieve "Affluence" and "Reputation," Franklin does not specify enhanced mating opportunities as a motivating factor—nor would we necessarily expect him to do so (1). Because it has been selected for throughout human evolutionary history, the inclination to acquire resources and achieve status exerts a powerful effect on human behavior even in the absence of conscious thinking about the likely payoff in terms of fitness. Franklin's ambitions are the proximate expression of an ultimate goal: wealth and power generally translate into more opportunities to pass on genes. This remains true whether or not he articulates the ultimate evolutionary function of his objectives. In taking for granted their universal desirability, moreover, he evinces awareness of their fundamental importance in human endeavors. He acknowledges the centrality of genetic continuity indirectly by formulating his autobiography at the outset as a letter to his son. He begins by asserting the importance of ancestry, emphasizing the general human wish to learn something about one's forebears and, in turn, to pass on to descendents information about the present generation. Thus he is persuaded that his own "Posterity may like to know" how he achieved his success in life (1). He devotes several pages of his book to family history, attempting to define himself and his descendents in the context of preceding generations. He takes particular pleasure in learning that one of his uncles was a notably "ingenious" man who became

7 David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 22-25.

8 Ibid., 22.

9 Ibid., 30.

"a chief Mover of all public Spirited Undertakings" (3); clearly he is intrigued and gratified to find that some of the qualities he most values in himself have manifested themselves previously in the Franklin lineage. He comes close to couching this "extraordinary" resemblance in terms of genetic inheritance with a jesting comment about the possible "Transmigration" of personality traits (3).

Other references to family, scattered throughout the narrative, subtly reinforce the importance of kinship. Franklin expresses grief at the loss of a young son to smallpox, for instance, and he makes use of the occasion to offer advice about inoculation to other parents: he takes for granted that all parents will be "bitterly" saddened by the loss of a child, that they naturally seek to protect their offspring from harm (83). He also describes the assistance he renders to his elder brother James by educating the latter's son and helping to establish him in business after James's death. Even though Franklin explains his actions as an effort to make "Amends" to his brother (for having failed to complete the full term of his apprenticeship), his benevolence to his nephew is a clear instance of nepotism (83). In helping a young relative to prosper in life, he helps himself—by maximizing his own inclusive fitness: he increases the likelihood that the genes he shares with that nephew will be passed on. Again he illustrates his implicit recognition of the biological underpinnings of human striving.

He devotes the bulk of his autobiographical energies to illustrating his successes and describing "the conducing Means" he employed to achieve them (1).[10] He highlights, through repetition, the importance of "Industry and Frugality" in building wealth (74, 78, 79). Numerous anecdotes illustrate his willingness to work hard and to minimize expenses in order to achieve financial security. At the same time he underscores the importance of long-range planning. Industrious and thrifty habits help him to achieve prosperity because at every point in his life he has clearly identified goals: to educate himself, for example, to become a good writer, to own a business. Over time his goals expand in a variety of directions: to contribute significantly to scientific research, for instance, to exercise effective community leadership, and even to achieve "moral Perfection" (66): purposefulness is a leitmotiv in the *Autobiography*. For maximum effectiveness, moreover, "Industry and Frugality" must be supported by competence. Franklin offers evidence that his high level of skill (as press-man, compositor, and supervisor) is a key

10 Lemay analyzes the famous sentence in which Franklin introduces his purposes, demonstrating how he "carefully reworked" its syntax so as to highlight the phrase "conducing Means." It is not *the nature* of his success, but *the means of achieving it*, that constitutes "the primary subject of his book." Lemay, "American Dream," 354, 355.

ingredient in his rapid rise to proprietorship of his own printing-house. Later, well-orchestrated exhibitions of competence bring in profitable jobs and increase demand for his services. His carefully honed skills as a writer likewise contribute to his rapid rise to prosperity, most importantly by ensuring the popularity of his newspaper and almanac.

In sum, Franklin harnesses exceptional skills, diligent work habits, and a thrifty lifestyle to high aspirations and sound planning. Setting out to develop and maintain this combination of qualities, he exhibits traits associated worldwide with "the sustained acquisition of resources over time." In all societies, Buss observes, "young men are evaluated for their promise," and "key signs" of future success include "education" and "industriousness," along with ambition.[11] Enumerating "tactics" with proven effectiveness, Buss echoes Franklin with startling fidelity: he emphasizes the importance of "putting in extra time and effort at work, managing time efficiently, prioritizing goals." Another strategy Buss identifies as critical is "working hard to impress others" and, unsurprisingly, image building is a recurrent theme in the *Autobiography*.[12]

Indeed, the detailed emphasis Franklin devotes to his arrival in Philadelphia provides a strong clue to the importance he places on community reputation and status.[13] He takes distinct pleasure in contrasting the picture he paints of a disheveled runaway boy with the prominent man he was later to become, that is, to "compare such unlikely Beginning with the Figure I have since made there" (20). From the very start he seeks to position himself advantageously in his community, to make a favorable impression on others. "I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all Appearances of the Contrary," he confides (54). For maximum effectiveness, an individual's good qualities must be "visible to … Neighbors" (49). Franklin is straightforward about his strategic efforts to create a good reputation for himself; he points out that those who obtain community regard are likely to have access to resources and influence. Potential customers, partners, and investors choose to do business with him because he wins a reputation for

11 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 30.

12 Ibid.

13 See Seavey, *Becoming*, 29-30; David Levin, "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: The Puritan Experimenter in Life and Art," *Yale Review* 53, no. 2 (1964): 258-59; Lemay, "American Dream," 355; Robert F. Sayre, *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 19; Robert F. Sayre, "The Worldly Franklin and the Provincial Critics," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 4 (1963): 516-17.

efficiency, speed, and cost-effectiveness. Managing his public image so successfully, he proves that he possesses a high degree of social intelligence: the ability to discern cultural norms and to assess probable penalties for deviation.[14] He is "constantly attuned to the expectations of those around him, responding swiftly to … changing situations."[15]

For the most part, he strives for congruence between his public image and his real self—that is, he wishes to be known for qualities he actually possesses—but there are interesting exceptions. He discusses at some length, for instance, the advantages to be derived from a reputation for humility, a virtue he reports having tried in vain to acquire. He did succeed to a considerable extent, he explains, in achieving "the *Appearance*" of humility (75). Avoiding "all direct Contradiction" and eschewing dogmatic terms such as "*certainly*" or "*undoubtedly*," he trained himself to phrase his opinions more modestly and more tentatively than had been his habit (75). Although these modifications to his style of conversation did not reflect a real character change, he forthrightly admits, he concludes that they proved valuable, nonetheless, because his opinions found "a readier Reception" and he began to have "much Weight with … Fellow Citizens" in civic and political matters (75, 76). Deliberately attempting to overcome a reputation for being "proud," "overbearing" and "insolent," he consciously forges a humble persona for himself, reaping "the Advantage of this Change in my Manners" (75). Despite the admitted disjunction between self and image, he does not condemn himself for dissimulation. Humble self-presentation may not be as admirable as genuine humility, but it is the next-best thing. Why?—because it fosters positive, productive sociopolitical interactions.

Consistently emphasizing the benefits of cooperative behaviors and attitudes, Franklin clearly indicates a commitment to the principles of reciprocal altruism. Reciprocity works in human communities by permitting benefits to be exchanged over time.[16] In this "very complex system" of human interaction, services or resources are given in the expectation of equal return

14 See Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 64-65.

15 John William Ward, "Who Was Benjamin Franklin?", *American Scholar* 32 (1963): 553. For discussion of social intelligence, including its cognitive functioning, adaptive usefulness, and probable origins, see Pascal Boyer and H. Clark Barrett, "Domain Specificity and Intuitive Ontology," in *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. David M. Buss (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005).

16 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 183-84.

(equal in value, not necessarily in kind) at a later date.[17] When the system functions properly, both parties stand to reap more in the way of benefits than they expend in costs. Illustration of this idea abounds in the *Autobiography*. Business partnerships are carried out most "amicably," he explains, when "every thing to be done by or expected from each partner" has been "very explicitly settled" (91). He further advises readers: "always render Accounts and make Remittances with great Clearness and Punctuality," since a demonstrated attentiveness to contracted obligations is "the most powerful of all Recommendations to new Employments and Increase of Business" (85). In a variety of contexts, throughout his narrative, Franklin emphasizes reciprocity as a cornerstone of social cooperation. Because undetected cheaters can obtain significant benefits, as Robert Trivers points out, cheating behavior is an inevitable hazard in reciprocal exchange. In consequence, humans have developed complex adaptive mechanisms for keeping track of reciprocal transactions and identifying unreliable exchange partners.[18] Franklin accordingly makes great efforts to win a reputation as a reliably cooperative community member. The emphasis he places on integrity is best understood in this context. He argues repeatedly that there is a positive correlation between the exercise of honesty and the acquisition of wealth. Keeping one's word, paying on time, charging fair prices, treating competitors decently: such practices foster lucrative enterprises in the long run, he counsels, because they provide evidence of a dedication to reciprocal obligation. He models his personal style according to these principles too, observing that it costs relatively little to be agreeable instead of contentious, or modest rather than overbearing, but the payoff in terms of universal friendly regard is potentially enormous.

Franklin acknowledges the importance of tit for tat behavior with particular effectiveness when he reports his occasional lapses from its standards. He designates as *errata*, for example, his failure to fulfill the terms of his apprenticeship, his long unpaid debt to his brother's friend Vernon, and the casual breaking of his tacit engagement to Deborah Read. Whenever possible he attempts to correct these asymmetrical transactions, often long after the fact. He indicates awareness of the human propensity to keep a mental scorecard of favors given and received.[19] Knowing that others will remark and resent any unequal exchanges, he goes to great lengths to prove (to readers as well

17 Robert Trivers, *Natural Selection and Social Theory: Selected Papers of Robert Trivers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

18 Trivers, *Natural Selection,* 38-46.

19 Ibid., 38; Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 227.

as to his exchange partners) that he remembers his obligations and will not, in the long run, default on them. He offers as a role model for readers his friend Mr. Denham, a man who demonstrates his "good … Character" by repaying "with Interest" debts incurred under an old bankruptcy and for which he already had "compounded" (39). Established in the Colonies, now far out of the reach of "his old Creditors," Mr. Denham might have kept all to himself the "plentiful Fortune" his exertions in America earned for him, but he chooses instead to repair old reciprocal alliances (39). This, Franklin asserts, is the kind of behavior that enhances an individual's reputation and thus is apt to glean long-term social and financial benefits.

Underlying much of his advice is the unstated premise that the social environment he and his readers inhabit is one in which crude displays of dominance—brute strength, reckless bravado, or ruthless bullying—will not prevail.[20] Describing himself as a natural leader, of an "early projecting public Spirit," he learns to exercise dominance subtly, often from behind the scenes (7). Numerous incidents support his claim that a deliberately adopted pose of modesty assists him in bringing many a "Scheme" to fruition (64). To avoid attracting envy or resentment, he learns to keep himself "out of sight," attributing his plans to "a *Number of Friends*" (64). He determines that it is wiser to lead inconspicuously, foregoing overt bids for power or admiration. Those shrewd enough to make "this little Sacrifice of … Vanity" will find it "repaid" in long-term good will, he counsels (64): people are more inclined to offer praise voluntarily to those who do not demand it. Illustrating the superior effectiveness of gentle persuasion and indirect leadership, he rejects strong-arm tactics, "dogmatical" styles, and self-glorifying impulses (14). It is worth noting that he emphasizes pragmatic results rather than ethical considerations: one should avoid domineering behavior because it is ineffective.

Franklin's views on this topic accord well with Christopher Boehm's analysis of reverse hierarchies, in which "the united subordinates are constantly putting down the more assertive alpha types in their midst." Societies Boehm describes as "egalitarian" engage in "vigilant suppression" of behaviors that might signal the emergence of despotically inclined leaders.[21] With his condemnation

20 See Trivers for discussion of "developmental plasticity," which enables individuals to make behavioral choices suited to the immediate environment: "relevant parameters … differ from one ecological and social situation to another." *Natural Selection,* 46. Pinker's book offers detailed consideration of "the dialectic between organism and environment," which "constantly changes over historical time." *The Blank Slate*, 127.

21 Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3, 169.

of power plays and self-glorification, Franklin demonstrates awareness that he lives in a community committed to egalitarianism as Boehm defines it. When he reports his ascension to important positions of leadership (in "every Part of our Civil Government"—"great Things to me"), Franklin is careful to inform readers that these honors are "entirely unsolicited," "without my ever asking any Elector for his Vote, or signifying either directly or indirectly any Desire of Being chosen" (100-101). His community entrusts him with power precisely because he does not appear to seek it, he reports, thus confirming the value of the strategic modesty and restraint he espouses.

An important feature of his commitment to cooperation is Franklin's disinclination to hold grudges or to respond aggressively to grievances. Even when injured or exploited by others, he displays a "remarkable" and "almost total lack of rancor."[22] Sent on a wild-goose chase to London by the false promises of Governor Keith, Franklin permits himself a few harsh reflections on the man who has "impos[ed] so grossly on a poor ignorant Boy," but he contemplates no retaliation (33). He does not seek the satisfaction of a personal encounter in which he might express his anger, for example, nor does he attempt to broadcast his story in an effort to shame or discredit the man whose "pitiful Tricks" have so inconvenienced him (33). He goes out of his way instead to offer readers a dispassionate summing up of Keith's character and accomplishments: aside from his "Habit" of tricking the naïve with empty "Expectations," he is "an ingenious, sensible Man," "a good Governor" who deserves credit for "several of our best Laws" (33). Here Franklin displays an even-tempered reaction to what most people would regard as extreme provocation. Instead of nursing the flames of righteous indignation, which might lead to futile demonstrations of aggression against a high-status individual, he deals practically with the problems Keith has caused him and then moves on. By responding to ill-use with a spirit of detachment, he avoids the high social and psychological costs of revenge. Thus he is free to channel his energies more positively toward the achievement of long-term goals.

He advises readers to avoid becoming embroiled in personal vendettas, asserting that it is best, whenever possible, to convert opponents into allies. "How much more profitable it is," he counsels, "to remove, than to resent, return and continue inimicable Proceedings" (85). When a new member of the General Assembly opposes the selection of Franklin as Assembly clerk, he does not indulge in self-pity or resentment. He foresees that this man is likely "in time" to wield "great Influence": instead of creating lasting enmity by reacting

22 Levin, "Puritan Experimenter," 267.

with knee-jerk hostility to a hostile act perpetrated by a person "of Fortune, and Education," he concocts a successful scheme to win the man's regard (84). Clearly he believes that anyone aspiring to rise in status and assume leadership roles needs a strong base of social support. Thus he avoids quarrels, even when provoked, especially with those in more powerful positions than his own. He also avoids being embroiled in hostilities perpetuated by others. He refuses, for example, to print "Libelling and Personal Abuse" in his newspaper, preserving his disengagement from local strife even at the cost of immediate profits (80). Instead of seeking to dominate those around him with exhibitions of temper or hostile threats (a masculine strategy that has proven effective in some social environments), he adopts a strategy of self-control based on long-term calculation of his own best interest. Implicit in his mild-mannered rejection of aggressive methods of self-defense is this message: it may feel good, briefly, to express rage and indulge in righteous resentment, but such behavior is apt to impede efforts to build wide-based community support.

Franklin does depict himself yielding to resentment on two memorable occasions. On the first of these, he dunks his friend Collins in the Delaware River for refusing to take his turn at rowing. Franklin's atypically hostile behavior in this incident expresses his frustration with a friendship that has grown burdensome: unemployed and "sotting with Brandy," Collins has been borrowing money "continually" (26). Giving way to his resentment decisively and aggressively, as he does, enables Franklin to terminate the friendship. He rids himself of a downwardly mobile companion whose presence in his life has become a social and financial liability. He indulges in rancor again when his courtship of a "very deserving" girl is thwarted by her parents, who refuse to meet his demands for a dowry: "I was forbidden the House, and the Daughter shut up" (55). Since the family had encouraged his suit until this point, he interprets their about-face as manipulative. In his view, they are trying to capitalize on his emotional involvement: they assume that he is "too far engag'd in Affection to retract" and that he will, in consequence, "steal a Marriage," thus freeing them from any formal financial obligation to the young couple (55). Rejecting the role of pawn to which he suspects he has been assigned, he ends his courtship forthwith and refuses to be "drawn … on again" even when the family shows signs of relenting (56). David Levin interprets this episode as a failure on Franklin's part to subordinate temper to long-term advantage: "he seems at last to have obeyed his own feelings of resentment rather than the economic interest that might have been served by allowing the girl's parents

to re-open negotiations."[23] Levin evidently overlooks the importance Franklin places on integrity in reciprocal transactions. To marry this girl would mean entering into a long-term alliance with her family, an alliance he is unwilling to forge with people who have tried to cheat him. It is not uncontrolled indignation that motivates his behavior, but self-protective caution.

Cooperation is so essential to economic and social advancement that it is sometimes necessary, Franklin acknowledges, to bow to the force of numbers or circumstance. When, for instance, his companions in the composing-room at Watts's printing-house try to collect double payment for the employee "Drink" fund, he learns that he must meet this unfair demand to protect himself from vengeful harassment: "little pieces … of mischief" directed against him (36-37). The fact that he is in the right, or that his supervisor supports his initial refusal to pay, does not matter: his antagonists outnumber him, and they have the power to make his workaday life miserable. He yields to the majority in this case, concluding that it is "Folly" to be "on ill Terms with those one is to live with continually" (37). He bends himself to majority opinion on a much larger scale, throughout most of his adult life, by suppressing his iconoclastic religious views. Disposed to "doubt of Revelation itself," he becomes a skeptic by the age of fifteen (45). Realizing that his "indiscrete Disputations about Religion" have caused him to be "pointed at with Horror by good People, as an Infidel or Atheist," however, he gradually begins censoring public expression of his thinking (17). In addition to "avoid[ing] all Discourse that might tend to lessen the good Opinion another might have of his own Religion," he makes monetary contributions to "whatever … sect" solicits his help (65). Such behavior is calculated to create the socially acceptable image of a man kindly disposed toward the religious institutions flourishing in his immediate environment. There are plenty of hints in his book that the inclination to satirize traditional dogma continued to be strong in him, for example, the "little metaphysical piece" he wrote in London, condemned by his employer as "abominable," and classified by Franklin as a youthful "erratum" (34). He is forthright about the trouble he courts with his apostasy, and he accurately senses that candor on this topic will mark him out for disfavor in his community, hindering financial and social advancement. It is his "accommodation with religion," as Seavey observes, that "made his career in business possible."[24]

23 Ibid., 265.

24 Seavey, *Becoming*, 57.

In myriad ways, readers observe, the ability to get along with others emerges as a vital first principle in Franklin's program for personal advancement. He presents himself as "a master of compromise."[25] Because success can be achieved only within the social community, it is counterproductive to exacerbate sources of disagreement. Even when he acknowledges that antagonistic strategies may bring short-term advantage, he underscores the more substantial benefits of civility and generosity. In order to squelch competition, he reports, the owner of the only newspaper in Philadelphia—who also "kept the Post Office"—forbids the mail riders to carry Franklin's papers (55). Years later, when Franklin himself becomes postmaster, he determines not to "imitate" his predecessor's "unkind" behavior (55). What, after all, does his rival's mean-spirited action accomplish? It inhibits a new competitor's efforts to some degree but in the long run succeeds only in triggering the "Resentment" of an up-and-coming young fellow-citizen (55). It does not, in the end, prevent the establishment of a second newspaper. Offering examples such as this one, Franklin emphasizes his conviction that the short-term gains from hostile exercises of power are outweighed by the acrimony they engender. To treat competitors unfairly only destroys opportunities for potentially profitable cooperative alliances in the future.

Arguing for the efficacy of reciprocal symmetry in business and personal relations, Franklin presents no anecdotes in which fraud bests integrity in the long run. His position on this point is significant in that evolutionary biologists have observed that deception for purposes of gain is ubiquitous in human societies: the combination of intelligence and language sets the stage for attempted misdirection and deceit of all kinds. Indeed, Buss lists deception as a tactic frequently employed to obtain status or resources.[26] Ranged against the successful implementation of deceit, however, is the powerful score-keeping mentality that is so integral a part of reciprocal exchange. Franklin's reliance on honesty presupposes the existence of effective cheater-detection mechanisms: he indicates that attempts at deception are very likely to be discovered, resented, and punished. Hence his advice to readers encourages reliance on straightforward methods such as hard work and thriftiness; he condemns false promises and duplicitous dealings as ineffective strategies in the quest for long-term success. It is only in the arena of self-presentation that he appears to embrace a moderate degree of deceptiveness. To comply with principles of social cooperation

25 Sayre, "The Worldly Franklin," 518.

26 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 30.

(such compliance being essential to secure prosperity and reputation, in his view), he is willing to pretend he is more humble—or more orthodox—than he is. He provides misleading cues about his personality, or about his personal beliefs, in order to avoid community disapprobation. Such deception is self-protective in intent, rather than actively exploitative; its goal is to maintain the community regard essential for success in his chosen enterprises.

The conscious calculation with which Franklin crafts his public image, together with his unabashed candor in describing his efforts in this regard, triggers more hostile response than does any other aspect of his self-presentation. Complaints that he is "engaged in pretending to be someone he really wasn't quite" abound.[27] Such exasperation is inevitable, Leibowitz asserts, since "the image of the self-made winner … invites defacement."[28] Often Franklin has been accused of manipulative and hypocritical behavior.[29] Sayre, Ward, Leibowitz, and Griffith address these criticisms, considering the historical, social, and psychological implications of Franklin's persistent role-playing[30] —a tendency that "inevitably casts unsteadying shadows on his sincerity."[31] Sayre observes that Franklin's "receptivity to new ideas, to new possibilities, and to new roles for himself" enables him to succeed in the prevailing socio-economic conditions.[32] Ward argues that "Franklin's self-awareness" and "lusty good sense" take much of the sting out of his image-building efforts: "his good humor in telling us about the part he is playing, the public clothes he is putting on to hide what his public will not openly buy."[33] Although Franklin bases much of his behavior upon "a commonsense utilitarianism which sometimes verges toward sheer crassness," he demonstrates its efficacy: "it worked. For this world, what others think of you is what is important."[34] Griffith rightly points out that "playing a role … is in itself morally neutral" and, as twentieth-century psychology has demonstrated, all humans assume a variety of social masks.

27 John Griffith, "Franklin's Sanity and the Man Behind the Masks," in *The Oldest Revolutionary*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 126.

28 Herbert Leibowitz, "'That Insinuating Man': *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*," in *Fabricating Lives: Explanations in American Autobiography*, ed. Herbert Leibowitz (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 32.

29 Ward, "Who Was," 541-53; Griffith, "Franklin's Sanity," 124-36.

30 Sayre, "Worldly Franklin"; Ward, "Who Was"; Leibowitz, "Insinuating Man"; Griffith, "Franklin's Sanity".

31 Griffith, "Franklin's Sanity," 126.

32 Sayre, "Worldly Franklin," 518.

33 Ward, "Who Was," 549, 553, 549.

34 Ibid., 553.

The examples Franklin offers in his own case (e.g., underlining his industriousness, or disguising his pride) are hardly demonic, Griffith argues: indeed, a "quality of innocence prevails in all Franklin's famous 'deceptions.'"[35]

On the topic of self-deception Franklin is astute and articulate, showing excellent insight into the human animal's capacity to construct self-serving arguments.[36] In the much admired passage in which he describes breaking his "Resolution of not eating animal Food," he draws on his own experience to illustrate the biased workings of supposedly rational thought (28). He describes how commitment to vegetarian principles is subverted by appetite. Convinced though he has been that devouring a living being constitutes "unprovok'd Murder," the enticing smell of fish "hot out of the Frying Pan" causes him to revise his thinking on the spot (28). After all, he argues to himself, the stomach contents of the cod show that *they* have been eating *their* fellow creatures; in dining on cod he will merely be imitating this example. He recognizes that he is using his mental powers to justify actions that contradict his stated convictions, and he gently mocks the ease with which he can shift from one line of argument to another simply to gratify his appetite: "So convenient a thing is it to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do" (28). He detects evidence of similar obfuscating reasoning, moreover, in those around him. On several occasions he observes members of the Quaker and Moravian sects contradicting their professed views, either by allocating funds for military purposes or by giving tacit support to aggressive self-defense: yet they disguise their deviation from principle with euphemisms (identifying gunpowder as "*other grain*") or delayed protests: "'*thee was willing enough that I should stay and help to fight … when thee thought there was Danger*'" (96, 95).

Franklin's evident disdain for deluded thinking manifests itself in a tendency to present his own motives with disarming candor. He approaches marriage, to name a conspicuous example, with conscious acknowledgement of the cost-benefit calculations that enter into the mate-selection process. As Buss's research indicates, people seek long-term partners with approximately equal mate value to their own, based upon attributes ranging from appearance, health, and personality to status and resources. A successful mate search requires realistic appraisal of one's own assets as well as those of a potential

35 Griffith, "Franklin's Sanity," 128, 136.

36 For analysis of mechanisms of self-deception from an evolutionary perspective, including origins and functions, see Trivers, *Natural Selection,* 255-93.

spouse.[37] Franklin describes his search for a wife very straight forwardly, in almost precisely such terms. He presents marriage as a refuge from the dangers of "Intrigues with low Women" and venereal "Distemper," as well as an opportunity to obtain the means of discharging outstanding business loans (56). He discovers, to his chagrin, that his perceived mate value is not as high as he himself has assessed it: "the Business of a Printer being generally thought a poor one, I was not to expect Money with a Wife, unless with such a one as I should not otherwise think agreeable" (56). In these few lines he articulates his understanding that marriage is a transaction to which each partner brings a bundle of assets in the expectation of obtaining equivalent value. The only girls whose parents will meet Franklin's dowry demands are those whose daughters suffer from unstated liabilities. The telling insertion of the word "otherwise" in the phrase "such a one as I should not *otherwise* think agreeable" shows his awareness that a sufficiently large economic inducement might be thought to compensate for other deficiencies (e.g., in appearance, personality, health, or social circumstance). Forced to reassess his own mate value downward, he settles for the distinctly liability-laden Deborah Read, whose marital status is ambiguous and whose runaway husband has left debts that "his Successor might be call'd upon to pay" (56).

His business-like approach to marriage no doubt conflicts with the romantic ideas harbored by many twentieth-century readers, but it is undeniably free from self-deceiving bombast. Franklin is not kidding himself about his motives or methods in seeking a wife. Throughout his book he provides evidence that he is determined to avoid falling, unwittingly, into counterfactual reasoning. Indeed, this goal appears to be just as strong as his desire to avoid consciously deceiving others. He admits, therefore, to weaknesses; he reports shortcomings. Although he hopes to persuade others that he has grown humble, for instance, he is careful not to persuade himself to share in that illusion. While narrating the early events in his life, he pauses to note flaws in his youthful behavior and assumptions: his manner to his brother was "perhaps … too saucy and provoking" (17); the "ingenious men" who praised his adolescent writing efforts probably were "not really so very good [judges]" as he then thought (15); praise "tended to make [him] too vain" (15). Such self-deprecation is intended to persuade readers that he is committed to honest self-appraisal, and it contributes, consequently, to the impact of his narrative.

37 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 8-9, 11-12, 284-85.

Admitting that he sometimes yields to narcissistic impulses, moreover, he shrewdly forestalls possible criticism: he disarms readers at the outset by admitting that to write down his personal history will "gratify [his] own *Vanity*" (2). Later, having devoted years to a minutely conceived, "arduous Project" for self-improvement, he gracefully acknowledges that his expectations were naively overweening: in the end, he "fell far short" of the "Perfection" he initially imagined to be achievable (66, 73). Readers are bound to like him better for this admission. He increases the likelihood that some may adopt his plan, in fact, by putting forward modest claims for its merits as well as his own. His consistent insight into his own motives and actions, coupled with his refusal to paint these in unfailingly rosy hues, renders him more fully human to his audience: he appears to be admirably "devoid of hokum."[38] Sensing that a robotically ideal model would inspire neither admiration nor imitation, he skillfully uses moments of candid self-reflection to add credibility to his account.[39] In the relationship between writer and reader, negatively framed self-disclosure becomes yet another mechanism for winning trust and support. Just as he seeks allies in his community, Franklin seeks them in the "Posterity" he addresses in his book.

His commitment to strategic alliance as an important mechanism for realizing his ambitions manifests itself in yet another aspect of his history: his enthusiasm for clubs, formal and informal. In his youth, he twice organizes friends into small groups devoted to improving themselves through reading and writing, stipulating regular meetings and specific assignments. Later he

38 W. Somerset Maugham, *Books and You* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1940), 82.

39 Seavey discusses in detail the two-part identity Franklin utilizes in his narrative: young Franklin presented in counterpoint to older Franklin; Franklin as author played off against Franklin as subject. *Becoming*, 38-47. Sayre, too, devotes attention to the double point of view in Franklin's narrative (see "Worldly Franklin," 516-23). "In a sense Franklin was writing to himself as well as about himself, developing correspondences between the past and the present," Sayre suggests: "the older Franklin publicize[s] his youth and also demonstrate[s] to himself a continuity between the retired gentleman who is writing and the boy and young man who was already receiving attention from men like the indulgent writer" (*Examined Self*, 17-19). Levin usefully addresses distinctions "between the *writer* of the book and the chief *character* he portrays. "Puritan Experimenter," 259. Examining evidence from the original manuscript, Zall shows how alterations to the text of various kinds (especially deletions and interpolations) reveal conscious intention on Franklin's part: he "shaped the plot, character, and theme" in his narrative to achieve specific purposes. P. M. Zall, "A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Artificer," in *The Oldest Revolutionary*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay, 53-65 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 54.

forms the Junto, "a club of mutual improvement" (47), exhibiting a gift for the "social networking" Buss identifies as one of the tactics used "to elevate … position within hierarchies."[40] By preparing and discussing essays on "Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy," club members expect to gain knowledge and cultivate their intellectual abilities; perhaps, too, they may heighten their ethical awareness or refine their moral principles (47). At the same time that it fosters intellectual and moral development, moreover, membership offers distinctly material advantages: in addition to increasing their ability to influence "public Affairs" for their collective benefit, those belonging to the group are actively engaged in "exerting themselves in recommending Business" to one another (84, 49). Claiming that the club succeeded in achieving both sets of purposes, Franklin demonstrates his conviction that these are mutually reinforcing.

Without any sense of contradiction or hypocrisy, men can club together in the hope of improving both their knowledge and their finances. Indeed, as Franklin's comments on his own long-term project in self-education demonstrate, he regards education as a significant business asset: men with a sophisticated knowledge base, including mathematics, sciences, history, and modern languages, have tools that can be used to obtain financial success and increased status. If he derives other benefits from his prosocial activities—that is, benefits unrelated to building resources and reputation—he does not state them. He emphasizes the utility of friendships and alliances in achieving critical long-term goals, never mentioning companionship as a benefit in and of itself. Precisely because important life goals are at stake, he does not believe in forming cooperative alliances randomly. As he makes clear later in his history, the Junto is a "Secret" society: "the intention was to avoid Applications of improper Persons for Admittance" (84). Although he does not linger on the point, he clearly indicates that choosing one's exchange partners carefully, with an eye toward long-term advantage, is crucial.

Franklin is convinced that the quest for worldly prosperity and social distinction is fully compatible with other, more seemingly idealistic objectives. To be well educated, socially responsible, ethically aware, and congenially cooperative is to magnify one's opportunities for accumulating resources and building status. Those who win broad-based liking and respect, those whose contributions to the community are valued, expand their range of influence and improve their social standing. Such dominant, high-status individuals are better able to acquire wealth than individuals who are perceived to be negligible, unhelpful,

40 Buss, *Evolution of Desire*, 30.

or anti-social. Franklin provides numerous examples to support his conclusion that doing the right thing, in terms of interpersonal and community good, invariably proves to be the right thing in terms of unvarnished self-interest. Ward comments on Franklin's "many-sided" nature, arguing that his personality is riddled with "opposites." Here Adaptationist theory proves its usefulness by helping readers perceive coherent motivation in seemingly inconsistent behavior. Thus Franklin is "an eminently reasonable man who maintained a deep skepticism about the power of reason;"[41] that is, he values his own intellectual capacities but is alert to the ever-present danger of self-deception. He retires from his print shop as soon as he can afford to do so, not because he is hypocritical in promoting a "gospel of hard work," but because industriousness is a means of achieving the goal of prosperity rather than an end in itself. His devotion to "the service of others" does not contradict his dedication to "his own advantage and personal advancement,"[42] since altruistic contributions serve to enhance reputation and raise stature. Apparent contradictions in Franklin's motives or deeds such as those Ward highlights assume coherency when examined through the lens of Darwinian logic.

Because a wide array of goals fits together so seamlessly in the world Franklin inhabits, he radiates a happy confidence that efforts in one arena will bear fruit in others. "The *Autobiography* is deliberately optimistic about mankind and about the future," as Lemay observes; it communicates "a philosophy of hope."[43] To devote time and energy to projects such as an improved fire department, more efficient street cleaning, or a broad-based book-lending system must be deemed altruistic, but the altruist himself, as a member of the community, stands to benefit from the improvements he initiates. Franklin celebrates the fact that social animals can serve self-interest and collective interests at one and the same time. Even a penchant for specialized research, like his personal passion for astronomy, is conducive to discoveries with potential long-range benefits to the public.

His famous project for "arriving at moral Perfection" similarly combines idealistic and worldly aims (66). He creates and defines his own list of ethically "necessary or desirable" attributes instead of accepting any pre-existing "Catalogue" (67). The "Virtues" he identifies emphasize socially useful traits, those likely to promote cooperation (67). They are not "the ends that Franklin

41 Ward, "Who Was," 541.

42 Ibid., 541.

43 Lemay, "American Dream," 357.

aims at," Lemay accurately points out, but "merely the means of discipline that will allow the ends to be achieved."[44] *Silence*, for example, supports talk that "may benefit others or yourself" (67). *Frugality* authorizes expense "to do good to others or yourself" (67). *Sincerity* condemns "hurtful Deceit" and encourages "just" thinking; that is, it enforces reliably reciprocal attitudes and behaviors (67). Following up on the theme of reciprocal obligation, *Justice* admonishes against "doing Injuries, or omitting the Benefits that are your Duty" (67). *Industry* reinforces the importance of working hard at "something useful" (67). *Moderation* highlights the importance of cooperation even in the face of hostility. In describing this virtue, Franklin underlines his conviction (well illustrated, as already noted, by his own behavior) that it is important not to use moral righteousness as an excuse for aggression: "Forbear resenting Injuries so much as you think they deserve," he counsels (67).[45] Readers observe that several of these virtues mention duty to self—right along with duty to others: Franklin's conception of moral perfection obviously includes responsible self-interest. Like everything else in his life, this project is predicated upon his insight that personal advantage is the wellspring of human motivation. He asserts that it is "our Interest to be completely virtuous," reiterating his conviction that ethical principles are useful and necessary to those who seek worldly success (66). Viewing the matter the other way around, he is consistent in his reasoning, arguing that some degree of material security and comfort provides the necessary foundation for moral behavior: "it being more difficult for a Man in Want, to act always honestly" (79). His conviction that economic advancement and moral advancement are mutually reinforcing goals no doubt contributes to his generally optimistic stance in life.

The intertwining of economic and moral ambition extends itself to his metaphysics. "The most acceptable Service of God," he assures readers, is "the doing Good to Man" (65). Observing the plethora of religious sects thriving in the American colonies, he labels as harmful only those doctrines that "divide us and make us unfriendly to one another" (65). He condemns as "unedifying" sermons whose aim is "rather to make us Presbyterians than good Citizens" (66). In effect, he asserts that social cooperation is the wish of the Almighty. Thus the *Autobiography* brings good news: the principles of reciprocity that ensure vocational success, create favorable reputation, and enhance social status also serve as the foundation of human morality and the core of human

44 Ibid., 355.

45 See Trivers, *Natural Selection*, 47, 276.

religious belief. There is no conflict between spiritual and material goals. Readers are apt to be heartened by Franklin's conviction that human purposes, seemingly so multifold and so incompatible, fit together coherently. Confident that it is not necessary to sacrifice one ambition in order to achieve others, he puts forward a view of human aspiration that is all-of-a-piece. This, together with his conviction that honest reciprocity inevitably trumps cheating, helps to explain the upbeat appeal of his book.

The particular historical context in which Franklin writes explains, at least in part, the source of his optimism. In a boom economy it is true to say that every competent, hard-working person can prosper. A rapidly increasing population, together with the availability of cheap and arable land, creates a continually increasing demand for goods and services; hence there is no need to employ devious tactics with competitors. As Franklin notes elsewhere, "the rapid increase of inhabitants takes away that fear of rivalship"; "there is room for them all."[46] Since everyone can do well, there is no downside to choosing cooperation as a *modus operandi*. Clearly the *Autobiography* celebrates some of the chief advantages the American colonial experience offered eighteenth-century Europeans, advantages that have remained an enduring theme in American national identity even though the circumstances fostering them have ceased to exist. His narrative depicts an individual analyzing his environment astutely, particularly its "openness" and "fluidity," shaping his own behavior in response to existing opportunities and constraints;[47] thus he maximizes his success. His book might have proven even more useful to future generations if he had articulated this point explicitly and advised his readers accordingly: *study your environment and adapt your strategies to accommodate prevailing conditions.* Instead he writes as if the environment he inhabits were unchanging and the "conducing Means" he utilizes were universally applicable. Ormond Seavey comments astutely on this point:

> Other writers of autobiography have been overtly aware of the character of their times as they wrote—Gibbon, Wordsworth, and Henry Adams, for example. For Franklin the age is almost entirely excluded from consideration. He was not disposed in the Autobiography to treat the eighteenth century as a distinctive period, burdened with its own limitations

46 Benjamin Franklin, "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* vol. A*: Beginnings to 1820*, 7th ed., ed. Nina Baym et al (New York and London: Norton, 2007), 467, 464.

47 Ward, "Who Was," 551.

> and proclivities. He was conscious all along of addressing posterity; he would be read not by his contemporaries but by the unforeseeable future. So he was unwilling to suggest that there have been large differences from one historical period to another, for fear of being trapped in a period himself.[48]

Franklin "presents his accomplishments not just as the product of one particular personality but as the natural human response to his circumstances"; throughout his book, therefore, he indicates his "belief in the existence of natural human responses."[49] Because its author subscribes to an idea of universal human nature that meshes well with current Adaptationist thinking, the *Autobiography* lends itself with particular ease to an evolutionary approach. Beginning with the assumption that every individual wishes, if possible, to acquire wealth and status, Franklin urges readers to adopt cooperative strategies in pursuing these aims. Long-term planning, goal-oriented initiative, genuine competence, and persistent diligence—supported by self-knowledge and social intelligence—lay the foundation for eventual success. Consistently prosocial strategies are crucial: being agreeable, getting along, supporting local customs and norms. Public image matters: community reputation must be intelligently managed. Hostile, ungenerous, or resentful behavior nearly always proves counter-productive, as do conspicuous efforts to gain power or prominence. Commitment to reciprocal obligation is essential. Contributions to group welfare, undertaken with careful modesty, embed the individual securely in a social network, while alliances and coalitions, wisely chosen, are efficient mechanisms for creating strong social and business supports and for extending personal influence.

From one point of view the *Autobiography* is "a self-portrait of the Enlightenment man," based upon a number of centrally important eighteenth-century ideas about human nature.[50] The book is a reflection of a particular time and place, and its author interprets his experience in light of values and assumptions shared by his contemporaries. "It points to Franklin's great capacity to respond to the situation in which he found himself and to play the expected role, to prepare a face to meet the faces that he met."[51] At the same time, however, Franklin's history shows an individual confronting

48 Seavey, *Becoming*, 38-39.
49 Ibid., 10.
50 Ibid., 38.
51 Ward, "Who Was," 548.

adaptive problems that have characterized human life since Paleolithic times. Like every individual, he is influenced in his choices and in his cost-benefit calculations (conscious or unconscious) by numerous factors: his own inherited phenotypic qualities (physical, mental, and emotional); his physical environment (its resources and threats); his social community (its customs, norms, and power structures); his position (economic and social) in his community. The sheer complexity of interaction among these variables explains why people living in the same time and place fail to display uniformity in their conduct or in their thinking. From the available possibilities, in terms of roles and beliefs, members of a given community will adopt some and reject others, positioning themselves sometimes conservatively, sometimes rebelliously. Certainly the *Autobiography* offers plenty of evidence that not all of Franklin's contemporaries react to the character of the times exactly as he does. "His own version of the age," Seavey notes, "was not the same Enlightenment as Voltaire's or Hume's or even Jefferson's."[52]

If it is useful and interesting to consider Franklin's conception of himself in relation to his age—and surely it is—it is equally useful and interesting to examine it in terms of human universals. The book's central character "sees … and fulfills natural, widely understandable desires."[53] Like every individual, Franklin finds himself situated in a particular cultural environment, an environment he must navigate successfully to achieve evolutionarily crucial objectives. His autobiography tells the story of his strivings as he wishes them to be perceived and understood. A literary artifact conveying its author's interpretations of the human condition, it attempts to render those interpretations plausible in light of readers' own observations of self and society.

52 Seavey, *Becoming*, 10.

53 Griffith, "Franklin's Sanity," 135.