

Puritanical Concepts and the American Dream in the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

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Abstract: This paper examines how Puritan values and the idea of the American Dream are closely connected in The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. By looking at Franklin's life and ideas, the paper shows how values such as hard work, saving money, self-improvement, and caring for the community influenced Franklin and many early Americans. The study explains how Franklin took these Puritan religious values and turned them into practical advice for success in life and society. It also explores how the American Dream, believing that anyone can achieve success through effort and ability, is both shown and questioned in Franklin's story. While Franklin's example has inspired generations, the paper also points out that this success story can sometimes hide real social problems and inequalities. In the end, the paper argues that Franklin's autobiography continues to shape American ideas about success, work, and morals, but also invites us to think critically about the fairness of these beliefs.

1. Introduction

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin is not only a legend of personal struggle but also a microcosm of early American culture. Throughout his life, Franklin embodied the Puritan values of diligence, frugality, and self-discipline, while also pursuing the ideals of freedom, opportunity, and success that define the American Dream. His experiences reveal the close connection between Puritanism and the American Dream. This paper will analyze the text to explore how Americans like Franklin, guided by the spirit of Puritanism, realized their personal values and how the American Dream profoundly influenced their generation and early American social values.

Franklin's life story is not merely an individual tale but a powerful mirror reflecting an entire nation in the making[1]. He grew up in a time when colonial society was shaped by religious convictions and the pursuit of new lives in a new world. Franklin's ascent from humble beginnings illustrates how these dual influences, religious discipline and a thirst for opportunity, can combine to transform both individuals and societies. As one of America's Founding Fathers, Franklin played an essential role in shaping the philosophical and ethical norms that would guide generations. The relationship between Puritan virtues and the American pursuit of success underpins much of what has come to be called the American character, and Franklin's autobiography is the quintessential document of this evolution. By examining Franklin's experiences, attitudes, and legacy, we gain valuable insights into how early Americans interpreted and pursued the elusive promise of self-

improvement, prosperity, and moral purpose.

2. The Historical Background and Core Content of Puritanism

2.1 The Origin and Development of the Puritan Movement

The Puritan movement originated in the 16th-century English Reformation. Puritans advocated for the simplification of religious rituals and emphasized the direct relationship between the individual and God[2,3]. In the early 17th century, some Puritans, dissatisfied with the authoritarianism of the Church of England, chose to migrate to North America in search of religious freedom and new opportunities for life. They established communities centered around their religious beliefs in North America, and their way of life and social institutions were deeply influenced by Puritanism.

The migration of the Puritans not only altered the demographic landscape of North America but also had immense implications for the formation of American social, political, and ethical systems. Upon settling, the Puritans built their towns and institutions guided by their desire for a community structured by biblical teaching and mutual accountability. Their congregational churches, town-hall meetings, and educational initiatives reflected a unique blend of religious seriousness and democratic impulses. The deep roots of Puritan values influenced not only matters of faith but also attitudes toward governance, education, and the work ethic. Such values became woven into the societal fabric and continued to influence subsequent generations, even as the religious fervor that birthed them began to wane.

2.2 The Core Content of Puritanism

The first one is diligence and frugality. Puritans believed that hard work was a “calling” from God, and that acquiring wealth through labor was a way to glorify God. At the same time, they advocated frugality and opposed extravagance, believing that wealth should be used for the public good. The second one is self-improvement and moral discipline. Puritans emphasized individual moral cultivation, striving for moral perfection through self-reflection and self-discipline. Franklin’s “moral chart” mentioned in his autobiography is a manifestation of this concept. The third one is social responsibility and communal awareness. Puritans valued social responsibility, believing that individual success should serve the entire community. They actively participated in public affairs and promoted social progress and development.

These three principles did not exist in isolation but worked together to set a high standard for personal behavior and public participation. Diligence and frugality shaped economic habits and discouraged idleness and luxury, which could lead to moral decay. The emphasis on self-improvement advanced a culture in which individuals were taught to scrutinize their motives and to push continually toward virtue. This was often enforced through diaries, “self-watch,” and church discipline, creating a community atmosphere that valued accountability and mutual exhortation. The principle of social responsibility ensured that success was framed not merely as individual attainment but as something that should contribute to the collective uplift. This ethic laid crucial groundwork for the civic institutions and communal practices that defined colonial and early republican America. In Franklin’s context, all these ideals converged in practical actions and a distinctive moral language that both defined and judged ambition, effort, and success.

3. The Manifestation of Puritanism in The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

Though some argue that although he was deeply influenced by Puritan culture, he was not a Puritan himself; others claim that despite his criticism of deism, he became an atheist. Some believe he was

a devout Christian, while others assert that he did not adhere to any religious faith. There are even those who regard him as the “founder of the anti-clerical tradition in American literature.”[4]. However, many of the standards and virtues he proposed in his autobiography coincide with certain Puritan concepts. For example, he wrote in his book “‘Seest thou a man diligent in his calling? He shall stand before kings.’ I therefore thought diligence the only certain means of obtaining wealth and respect.” and the fifth and sixth of his thirteen virtues are “Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing. Industry: Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.” (149), these instances collectively underscore the central place of industry and frugality in his value system, reveal a conscious effort to sacralize capitalist ethics through Puritan discourse.

Franklin’s thirteen virtues themselves are a mark of self-improvement and moral self-discipline. For the moral self-discipline, the first one of the thirteen virtues is Temperance. It means “Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.” (149), though it just restricts in daily food and drink, but we can get a glimpse of how strict his moral self-discipline can be from this. Furthermore, regarding the Puritan concept of social responsibility, we can see through the part two: Public Library. In this part, Franklin told us a story about how he started the first public library in Pennsylvania. He combined all the advantages of the club's library and promoted them to the public, establishing a public lending library.

All in all, although Franklin claimed that he did not adhere to any particular religious belief, the various manifestations in his writings clearly show the profound influence of Puritan pragmatism on him. This indirectly proves that in his heart, he was actually a devout Christian.

Franklin’s approach was not one of blind imitation but of adaptation and rational reevaluation. He transformed Puritan moral doctrines into a secular approach to life that retained the benefits of discipline while discarding theological rigidity. When Franklin emphasizes moral habits like temperance, order, and resolution, he not only borrows from Puritan doctrine but also provides a modern, Enlightenment-era template for personal betterment. His emphasis on public service likewise reshapes the old Puritan community ideal into civic institutions and voluntary associations. Thus, his autobiography becomes a bridge, connecting the religious legacy of Puritanism to a new American ethos of practical virtue, rational progress, and collective improvement.

4. The Connotation and Origin of the American Dream

The connotation and origin of the American Dream are closely related to the core values and cultural background of early American society. It can date back to James Truslow Adams’s *The Epic of America*, in this book Adams describes the American Dream as follows:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. [...] A social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

The origin of the American Dream can be traced back to the period when the Puritans migrated to North America. They came to this land with a desire for religious freedom and a new life, and in the process, they developed values such as hard work, frugality, and self-improvement. These concepts not only shaped the early American social culture but also laid the foundation for the formation of the American Dream.

Its central tenets include three aspects. First, the political ideals of “democracy, freedom, and equality.” Human rights, equality, and freedom are their spiritual pursuits and universal values. Second, the idea of getting rich. Maximizing the pursuit of wealth, accumulating wealth, and expanding private property are their constant goals and motivations. Third, the idea of individual

struggle. Heroes are not judged by their origins. People value what a person can do and has achieved now, rather than who his ancestors were. They admire the idea of gaining property and status, success and glory, and living a prosperous and free life through one's own efforts. Over time, the meaning of the American Dream has continued to evolve, expanding from early material pursuits to a broader focus on social justice, educational opportunities, and personal development, becoming one of the most representative concepts in American culture.

Significantly, as American society developed, this dream became not only personal but also collective. It inspired social movements, spurred waves of immigration, and justified both extraordinary achievement and strenuous reform. At the same time, the Dream's promise often masked disparities and inequalities, as only some could fully access its rewards. Its language acquired a dual function, as an inspiration for progress, and, sometimes, as an alibi for systemic shortcomings. Franklin's story dramatizes this duality, transforming the Puritan dream of a "city upon a hill" into an individual quest for advancement, yet never breaking its essential link to social aspiration and duty.

5. The Manifestation of the American Dream in The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

In *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the American Dream is not an abstract ideal but a concrete program materialized through replicable behavioral models, such as the thirteen virtues codified in his moral ledger and the minutely scheduled time management, that embody quantified systems of self-governance. Franklin deliberately obscures his origins as a candlemaker's son, foregrounding instead his rise from printer's apprentice to prominence. This narrative strategy reconstructs "birthright" as "behavioral merit" in the New World, thereby transforming the Puritan concept of "elect" into the secular archetype of the "self-made man." Success thus shifts from theological grace to a rational engineering project.

Crucially, Franklin's American Dream carries an inherent public dimension. His civic ventures, the volunteer fire brigade, subscription library, and Pennsylvania Hospital, reveal a symbiotic relationship between individual achievement and communal welfare. When he writes in the third person that "Franklin proposed the establishment of a subscription library," he transmutes personal experience into civic templates, binding private virtues to public duties. This logic injects republican DNA into the American Dream. However, this "virtue-to-wealth" linearity contains paradoxes: while Franklin declares "time is money" in Philadelphia, he performs the role of the "plain philosopher" in Parisian salons, wearing a coonskin cap as cultural theater. This contradiction exposes the dual nature of the American Dream; it functions both as a pragmatic survival manual and as a rhetorical construct for nation-building.

Franklin's story provided an example to countless Americans who sought to rise by their own effort. The model he presents, however, is neither naive nor simplistic. He acknowledges both the necessity of hard work and the importance of seizing opportunities, but he also constructs his success in such a way that it seems universally accessible, perpetuating the lineage from the Puritan "elect" to the American "meritocrat." This representation serves national myth but sometimes overlooks the barriers that made such ascents rare. Even so, the autobiography continues to inspire, not only for what it promises but also for the deep questions it raises about talent, luck, virtue, and justice.

6. Conclusion

In summary, in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Puritanism functions as a "moral filter." While quoting Proverbs' biblical injunction that "the diligent shall stand before kings" in his autobiography, Franklin surreptitiously replaces "serving God" with "accumulating wealth." This repurposing of religious rhetoric essentially sanctifies capitalist profit-seeking. The autobiography's persistent emphasis on "upward mobility through hard work" obscures harsh historical realities,

archival records show that less than one in ten apprentices in Philadelphia's 18th-century printing trade eventually became master printers. Such "rags-to-riches mythology" shifts blame for poverty onto individual laziness, thereby legitimizing systemic inequality in resource distribution. More crucially, this discourse harbors inherent contradictions. Franklin simultaneously leverages Puritan virtues to establish moral authority while evading Christianity's critiques of wealth. These tensions spawn what Pierre Bourdieu termed the "gentle lie", the naturalization of socially constructed class hierarchies as meritocratic outcomes. Like digital photo filters airbrushing imperfections, Franklin's moral narratives digitally retouch capitalism's exploitative nature, revealing the system's fundamental flaw: its perpetual dependence on repackaging traditional ethics to mask inherent inequities. In reflecting on Franklin's autobiography, we are challenged to admire the practical wisdom and aspirational vision while also grappling with its limits and contradictions. Franklin's story remains a model for personal and civic conduct, but it also asks us to consider how ideals can at times obscure complexities and deepen inequalities. It is this dual legacy, both empowering and cautionary, that secures the autobiography's continuing place at the heart of American self-understanding.

References

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