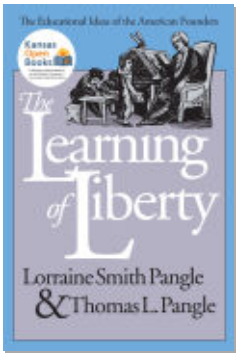
11 Education through the Free Exchange of Ideas



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11 • Education through the Free Exchange of Ideas

Proclamations, the jury trial, local political life, and a close relationship between the people and their legislators are all useful means of fostering civic virtue; yet each depends on a further agency of education, perhaps more important than all the rest: a free and flourishing press. Jefferson sums up the benefits of a free press in a letter written at the end of his life.

> This formidable censor of the public functionaries, by arraigning them at the tribunal of public opinion, produces reform peaceably, which must otherwise be done by revolution. It is also the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral, and social being.[1]

Tocqueville also underlines the tremendous importance of a free press in America, and he adds precision to Jefferson's remarks about the role of the press in the people's moral education. He argues that local freedom, associations, and newspapers are all interdependent and that the press is indispensable for keeping men informed about their common concerns in a world where traditional bonds of family, class, and birthplace are severed and individual isolation and political apathy are a growing danger.

> A newspaper is an adviser that does not require to be sought, but that comes of its own accord and talks to you briefly every day of the common weal, without distracting you from your private affairs.
>
> Newspapers therefore become more necessary in proportion as men become more equal and individualism more to be feared. To suppose that they only serve to protect freedom would be to diminish their importance: they maintain civilization.[2]

Justification for the Freedom of the Press

The Founders also defend the freedoms of speech and of the press as fundamental rights, but their practical arguments, tying a free press to the essential needs of a self-governing community, show how different these freedoms are from another that is closely related: the freedom of religion. Jefferson could claim an *absolute* freedom of religion on the grounds that just government simply has no purview over religious truths and falsehoods: "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."[3] But a free press *can* injure individuals by depriving them of their reputation; a free press can threaten the public peace by disseminating malicious lies about the government or by attacking the principles of the regime itself. Precisely because they valued the press as the educator of a free people, the Founders were concerned to keep it from betraying their trust and abusing its powers.

It was during the Revolution that the people's freedom had been most in danger; this had led to obvious violations of the loyalists' rights, but it had also induced a keen awareness of how problematic the freedoms of speech and press can be in times of fundamental disagreement. Francis Hopkinson, a member of the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence, explains that while he cherishes the liberty of the press,

> when this privilege is manifestly abused, and the press becomes an engine for sowing the most dangerous dissensions, for spreading false alarms, and undermining the very foundations of government, ought not that government upon the plain principles of self-preservation to silence by its own authority, such a daring violator of its peace, and tear from its bosom the serpent that would sting it to death?[4]

After the crisis had passed, Franklin in particular remained anxious about the potentially tyrannical power of an unregulated press. In a wry exposition, he calls it "the supremest court of judicature in Pennsylvania," able to "judge, sentence, and condemn to infamy, not only private individuals, but public bodies, etc., with or without inquiry or hearing, *at the court's discretion*." One possible remedy, he suggests, is to join the liberty of the press with the "liberty of the cudgel" to punish private libels, and, when the public is affronted, "*as it ought to be*, with the conduct of such writers . . . we should in moderation content ourselves with tarring and feathering, and tossing in a blanket." But in case his fellow citizens should find this remedy inappropriate, he humbly proposes that they pass a law to mark explicitly the limits of the press's freedom and to secure

citizens from assaults to their reputations as well as their persons. Even Jefferson, who hoped for so much from the free press, despaired when he saw newspapers turn into dishonest party rags: "Suppression of the press could not more compleatly deprive the nation of it's benefits, than is done by it's abandoned prostitution to falsehood."[5]

Now if religious freedom is considered a right because it concerns only the private conscience, over which government has no legitimate authority, on what basis can one claim a right to criticize and so perhaps undermine one's government? Leonard Levy, the leading historian on the subject, seems to derive this right from the claim that no opinion may be justly suppressed because the truth of all opinions—including those underlying any particular regime—is "relative rather than absolute."[6] But if Levy is correct, and all truth is relative, then why isn't his own opinion opposing restriction on freedom of speech and press just as relative or subjective, just as defensible or indefensible, as that of the most willful and capricious opponent of freedom? An examination of the sources of the Founders' understanding of free speech suggests a far more coherent and morally sophisticated (i.e., nonrelativistic), understanding of the freedom of the press. It was precisely the conviction that their political system rested on universally valid truths that led the Founders to uphold the freedoms of speech and of the press as objective rights—and that governed the application and defined the limits of those rights.

We have already examined one important source of the Founders' thinking on this subject: Milton's *Areopagitica*. Milton did not, to modern eyes, carry the argument for freedom of the press very far, but he carried it as far as it could go without a new, liberal conception of politics. Only when the purpose of government was held to be the preservation of men's rights and not the salvation of their souls—only when the authority of government was held to rest upon popular consent—could the freedoms of speech and of the press come to be regarded as *natural* rights. In practical terms, this growing liberalism had the effect of extending to the public at large the freedom first claimed by the British Parliament for itself. By 1689 Parliament had secured from the king the right to speak freely and critically, but in England and in early colonial America, legislatures still punished private persons for a "breach of parliamentary privilege" if they printed the proceedings of the government without permission. Published reports that reflected badly upon the government were prosecuted in court as seditious libels, because of their presumed tendency to cause a breach of the peace. On this view, as Levy notes, the truth of one's statements does not excuse and can even be said to aggravate the crime, since true charges may provoke greater disaffection and turmoil than false charges.[7]

In the eighteenth century, building on Locke's teachings about the source of political authority, a broader view of free speech emerged—a view expressed with

striking boldness and clarity in Trenchard and Gordon's popular series of essays, *Cato's Letters*.

> That men ought to speak well of their Governors, is true, while their Governors deserve to be well spoken of; but to do publick Mischief, without hearing of it, is only the Prerogative and Felicity of Tyranny: A free People will be shewing that they are so, by their Freedom of Speech.
>
> The Administration of Government, is nothing else but the Attendance of the Trustees of the People upon the Interest and Affairs of the People: And as it is the Part and Business of the People, for whose Sake alone all publick Matters are or ought to be transacted, to see whether they be well or ill transacted; so it is the Interest, and ought to be the Ambition, of all honest Magistrates, to have their Deeds openly examined, and publickly scanned: Only the wicked Governors of Men dread what is said of them.[8]

These arguments were eventually elaborated by the American Founders. Madison, in his otherwise controversial 1800 "Report on the Virginia Resolutions," sums up the American consensus on this point. Because the people have a right to a government of their own choosing, because they cannot choose well without information, and because the right to vote is useless without a full discussion of the merits and demerits of all candidates, the freedoms of speech and of the press are essential rights of citizens in a republic and "the only effectual guardian of every other right." And if republicanism more than other regimes requires for its proper functioning that the truth be generally known, Madison writes, republicanism is also the regime that has least to fear from the truth:

> The nature of governments elective, limited, and responsible, in all their branches, may well be supposed to require a greater freedom of animadversion than might be tolerated by the genius of such a government as that of Great Britain. In the latter it is a maxim that the King, an hereditary, not a responsible magistrate, can do no wrong, and that the Legislature, which in two-thirds of its composition is also hereditary, not responsible, can do what it pleases. . . . Is it not natural and necessary, under such different circumstances, that a different degree of freedom in the use of the press should be contemplated?[9]

Not only is republicanism safe with free inquiry because bad administrations can be peacefully voted out of office, but it is safe, the Founders believed, because it rests upon a foundation of self-evident truths, which they were confident free inquiry would only strengthen. Today we live with the paradox that while elite opinion has come to reject these "self-evident truths" as culture-

bound and hopelessly naive, many of the peoples now emerging from totalitarianism are confirming by their choices that democratic governments devoted to the protection of individual rights do indeed answer to deep and abiding needs in human nature. Be this as it may, what becomes clear from the Founders' statements is that for them, the freedoms of speech and of the press were rights intrinsically linked to a certain kind of government. If this government is justified in part by its dedication to leaving the individual mind and conscience unshackled, a free press is in turn justified, in part, by its responsibility to ferret out and publicize the truth about political affairs.

Limits on Press Freedoms

Therefore it comes as no surprise that when the Founders came to revise the old common law governing press freedoms, they did so with a special regard for the role of the truth. The history of American prosecutions for seditious libel reveals a progress that was uneven and, in the heat of party conflicts, too often fraught with hypocrisy. But the policy that the nation groped toward and ultimately reached consensus upon was the one articulated by Alexander Hamilton as counsel for the defense in the influential 1804 New York case, *People v. Croswell*. Croswell had been convicted of libeling Thomas Jefferson. The trial judge denied him the opportunity to prove the truth of his statements and charged the jury to determine only the fact of publication and the truth of the innuendoes, i.e., whether the meaning given the words by the prosecution was accurate. In the appeal, with arguments reminiscent of the famous *Zenger* case seventy years before, Hamilton said that the jury should have been allowed to judge Croswell's intent, and that the veracity of his statements had a direct bearing on the question of intent. As the court record summarizes his argument:

> The liberty of the press consisted in publishing with impunity, truth with good motives, and for justifiable ends, whether it related to men or to measures. . . . If this right was not permitted to exist in vigor and in exercise, good men would become silent; corruption and tyranny would go on, step by step, in usurpation, until at last, nothing that was worth speaking, or writing, or acting for, would be left in our country.
>
> But he did not mean to be understood as being the advocate of a press wholly without control. He reprobated the novel, the visionary, the pestilential doctrine of an unchecked press. . . . It would encourage vice, compel the virtuous to retire, destroy confidence, and confound the innocent with the guilty.

And indeed, "in determining the character of a libel . . . the truth may not always be decisive; but being abused may still admit of a malicious and mischievous intent, which may constitute a libel."[10]

Thus the rule of public discourse was to be "the truth with good motives, and for justifiable ends." The people would be badly served if the press did not keep watch on the rulers and expose their errors, but they would be equally ill-served if citizens of character avoided public office for fear of being gratuitously dragged through the mud. Partly because the press of their day was so intemperate, the Founders were more than a little troubled by the tone of public discourse they saw emerging around them. It is true that the painful "torrent of slander" that Jefferson decried did not stop him or Washington or any of their colleagues from serving in office; but their standing as gentlemen, as men of learning, and as revolutionary heroes allowed them to treat the newspapers' attacks with a certain contempt that later politicians were less likely to muster.[11]

On the other hand, while there came to be broad agreement on Hamilton's formulation, dissenters remained. One was James Madison, whose "Report on the Virginia Resolutions" defended his state's resistance to the 1798 federal Sedition Act. This defiance had arisen even though the act incorporated the principles of jury trial and truth as a defense, which were adopted in most state laws only after *Croswell*. Although the crux of the Republicans' resistance was their belief that the regulation of the press belonged of right to the states and not to the federal government, Madison also made arguments that called the fairness of *any* seditious libel prosecution into question. He noted that malicious intent was too often simply inferred from the publication of words tending to bring the government into contempt, even though that contempt might be deserved. He stressed the difficulty at times of proving the truth of remarks that may in fact be correct, and the difficulty at all times of proving the truth of opinions. And with this last argument, we come to a troublesome question. How much scope should a free government allow for the expression of political opinions—opinions that it may consider not only false but subversive of its very foundations? Does Madison's argument imply that all opinion should be tolerated, and that if as a consequence a government loses the people's support, that government is ipso facto illegitimate? This was the view of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wrote in his famous *Abrams* dissent:

> When men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas,—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market; and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That, at any rate, is the theory of our Constitution.[12]

But as Walter Berns has contended, there is something absurd in carrying free speech to such lengths that we allow it to destroy freedom itself.[13] Holmes wrote

in the salad days before the emergence of fascism and communism as mass movements of frightening popularity and viciousness. The Founders, far less naive, took much less for granted. They were not impressed by whatever "fighting faiths" might win over a majority of public opinion, as is seen from Publius's comments about mobs and the Federalists' horror at the excesses of the French Revolution. To the Founders, the American regime was legitimate not only because it had the people's consent but above all because it rested on true principles; and if the Framers were hopeful that the regime would continue to hold the people's consent, they were too deeply aware of the power of passion and prejudice to be complacent. That is why they gave so much thought to education, and why Jefferson opposed the free immigration of monarchists, who "will bring with them the principles of the governments they leave, imbibed in their early youth."[14]

Although Holmes's relativism is a far cry from the spirit of the Founders, they nevertheless came to agree that it was best, *as a matter of policy*, to allow a very broad freedom for dissenting opinion in politics as in all fields. The Founders never said with Levy that a free government cannot be libeled or that words alone cannot be criminal.[15] What they did come to believe was that in a free and stable society, prosecution for seditious libel was unnecessary, and that as a dangerous and potentially oppressive tool, it should be dispensed with. To say that a free government *cannot* be libeled suggests that the government is merely the people's servant, to be given orders, examined, and dismissed at will whenever the people so choose. The Founders had a more classical understanding of the importance of reverence for political institutions and authorities. They believed, however, that government can best keep this respect by open rebuttals of charges rather than by prosecuting its critics. As Jefferson said in his First Inaugural Address:

> Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. . . . If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.

When Jefferson spoke these words, the nation had just come through a political convulsion in which each party feared that the other would prove the undoing of the entire republican experiment and the idea of a loyal opposition was still in its wobbling infancy. Four years later, the nation's unity was more solid, and an experiment with extreme freedom of the press had persuaded Jefferson that an honorable government could not be "written down by falsehood and defamation." He concluded that

> since truth and reason have maintained their ground against false opinion in league with false facts, the press, confined to truth, needs no other legal restraint; the public judgment will correct false reasonings and opinions, on a full hearing of all parties, and no other definite line can be drawn between the inestimable liberty of the press and its demoralizing licentiousness.[16]

The Founders were content to let trials for seditious libel fall out of use, but they never proposed dispensing with libel proceedings altogether, even on behalf of public figures. If the immediate goal of these lawsuits was to protect the reputations of the individuals in question, a much broader public purpose was also to be served, in holding the press's factual reporting to a standard of truth and in maintaining a tone of respect in public discourse.

Journalists as Educators

Yet even the threat of lawsuits did not ensure that the newspapers would, as Jefferson hoped, make their readers more rational or moral human beings. Fisher Ames, a leading Federalist and member of the House of Representatives during Washington's administration, contended that in fact newspapers were having precisely the opposite effect. He charged the partisan press of his day with inflaming readers' fears, hatreds, and prejudices, while doing nothing to encourage moderation and reasoned debate.

> The press . . . has left the understanding of the mass of men just where it found it; but by supplying an endless stimulus to their imagination and passions, it has rendered their temper and habits infinitely worse. . . .
>
> By the help of the press we see invisible things; we forsee evils in their embryo, and accumulate on the present moment all that is bitter in the past or terrible in the future. A whole people are made sick with the diseases of the imagination. They see a monarch in Washington, and conspirators in their patriots.[17]

And when the press is not fanning the flames of party hatreds, he writes, too often it is indulging other unhealthy proclivities. In an address to printers, Ames castigates them for filling their columns with "murders, suicides, prodigies, [and] monstrous births." Such sensationalism is worse than useless; stories of crime inspire imitators, while a stream of shocking accounts loses, in time, its ability to shock, and leaves the mind vacant and unable to attend to serious matters that require real reflection. Ames never questions the idea of a party

newspaper, but he would have his party's leading paper set a new standard of responsibility, eschewing all abuse of public figures, never lying even for a good cause, explaining the Federalist position, but avoiding disputation.[18]

Taking the Founders' arguments for the freedom of the press together with Ames's critique of its irresponsibility, it is apparent that something both less and more than extensive government regulation is needed to make the press useful to a republic. A number of early editors joined Ames in his criticisms, challenging their colleagues to shoulder more squarely their obligations as civic educators. John Ward Fenno of the Federalist *Gazette of the United States* called for educational and professional standards for editors, "qualifications and pledges from men on whom the nation depends for all the information and much of the instruction that it received," and he hoped that well-regulated colleges would fill this need.[19] Nathan Hale, nephew of the revolutionary hero, upbraided the readers of his *Boston Daily Advertiser* for grasping at rumors, being unwilling to wait for full and accurate accounts, and expecting editors to condense news to the point that "it may be comprehended at a single glance . . . a luxury with which we have strenuously refused to indulge the readers of this paper."[20] But it is Noah Webster, in the opening issue of his *Minerva*, who gives perhaps the best exposition of the significance and responsibility of newspaper editors in a democracy.

> Most of the Citizens of America are not only acquainted with letters and able to read their native language; but they have a strong inclination to acquire, and property to purchase, the means of knowledge. Of all these means of knowledge, Newspapers are the most eagerly sought after, and the most generally diffused. In no other country on earth, not even in Great-Britain, are Newspapers so generally circulated. . . . But Newspapers are not only the vehicles of what is called news; they are the common instruments of what is called social intercourse, by which the citizens of this vast Republic constantly discourse and debate with each other on subjects of public concern. It is by means of these, that in times of danger, either from open hostility or insidious intrigue, an alarm is instantly conveyed and an unanimity of opinion is formed, from Maine to Georgia. . . . The foundation of all free governments, seems to be, a general diffusion of knowledge. People . . . must have just ideas of their own rights, and learn to distinguish them from the rights of others, before they can form any rational system of government, or be capable of maintaining it. To know that we have rights, is very easy; to know how to preserve those rights, to adjust contending claims, and to prescribe the limits of each; here lies the difficulty.

A chief function of the papers, then, should be to foster the practical wisdom that comes through studying the application of general principles to concrete

cases. Such wisdom, in turn, is the only sure protection against corruption and abuse of power. Therefore, Webster argues, government should take care to encourage newspapers: "Like schools, they should be considered as the auxiliaries of government, and placed on a respectable footing; they should be the heralds of truth, the protectors of peace and good order."[21]

Over time, these hopes for a professional, accurate, and reasonably nonpartisan press have been abundantly realized. Whereas the first American newspapers, run by poorly educated printers, reprinted essays and whatever scraps of news came to hand, and the partisan press of the late eighteenth century loaded its pages with much political controversy and little reliable information, since that time the mainstream press has improved immeasurably in tone and in accurate reporting. But while much has been gained, something also has been lost: the sense of mission Franklin had in mind when he suggested that in the scattered but literate republic of the United States, journalism might fill the same function as public oratory in the classical republics. Today the very idea of rhetoric has come into disrepute, assuming connotations of dishonest arguments, slick public relations, or demagogues playing on the passions of a crowd. But responsible rhetoric has a different purpose. By it, what is publicly useful in the abstruse thought of the learned is made available, and made appealing, to those who lack the leisure or the understanding to plumb that thought itself. For American newspapers, this mission would mean devoting more attention to educating the minds and tastes of readers with lively but thoughtful pieces on political and moral subjects. As Franklin wrote in his *Autobiography*:

> I consider'd my Newspaper also as another Means of Communicating Instruction, and in that View frequently reprinted in it Extracts from the Spectator and other moral Writers, and sometimes publish'd little Pieces of my own which had been first composed for Reading in our Junto. Of these are a Socratic Dialogue tending to prove, that, whatever might be his Parts and Abilities, a vicious Man could not properly be called a Man of Sense. And a Discourse on Self denial, showing that Virtue was not secure, till its Practice became a Habitude, and was free from the Opposition of contrary Inclinations.[22]

In undertaking to write serious essays for a popular audience, Franklin was joined by many of the best minds of his day. These included John Dickinson, whose "Letters from a Farmer" were perhaps the most thoughtful political writings in prerevolutionary America; Samuel and John Adams; and Madison, Hamilton, and Jay with their classic *Federalist Papers*, to say nothing of the less famous but often equally trenchant arguments on both sides of the constitutional debate, all of which were printed in newspapers. While contemporary

opinion pieces rarely descend to the depths of scurrility and blatant falsehood that was common in the nation's early papers, they also rarely reach the heights of these finer works. What is lacking today are essays that confront the most fundamental questions of politics and morality—what true virtue is, or what the sources of rights are, for example—in a way that is informed by genuine philosophy.

In a provocative essay, Gordon Wood has argued that the Founders were themselves responsible for the decline in the level of public discourse that has occurred since their day. These leaders, he says, addressed themselves chiefly to other "gentlemen," while at the same time unleashing democratic forces that would ultimately bring "a decline in the intellectual quality of American political life and an eventual separation of ideas and power." The Founders did indeed address one another, expressing many of their thoughts in private letters and filling their published essays with learned citations and historical allusions. But Wood misses or blurs the crucial point when he concludes from this that they were elitist, "essentially engaged, despite their occasional condescension towards a larger public, in either amusing men like themselves or in educating men to be or think like themselves."[23] Surely they were kept from elitism by precisely this last commitment: by their intent to educate through their writings, to reach the intellectually able at all social levels, and to inspire the intellectually ordinary with a greater share of sound reasoning.

Wood argues that in vying for power, revolutionary leaders were led to express more democratic sentiments than they felt. Once they had roused the people, they found that politics was no longer an exclusively gentlemanly affair, and they were forced to yield ground to the egalitarian ideology of the Revolution. There is surely some truth in this. But Wood understates the extent to which the Founders *were* cautiously optimistic about popular government, when hedged and channeled by all the new improvements in the science of politics that Hamilton and Madison celebrate in the *Federalist Papers*. The Founders were taking a great gamble, hoping that by challenging the entrenched aristocracy they might establish a new, more open and fluid aristocracy of talents and merit. If their experiment ended by bringing political life and public discourse down to the level of the masses rather than bringing the people up to their level, they are not altogether to blame. Responsibility lies also with the American people, who failed to rise to the challenge, as well as with the subsequent generations of American journalists and intellectuals. The fact that the Founders' hope has been so imperfectly realized points to a certain paradox of modern writing. While journalists and intellectuals are careful not to talk down to their readers and are afraid of seeming to preach, both fail to take the public quite seriously enough to consider the education of the people the noblest goal of a lifetime of high-quality writing.

Libraries, Philosophic Societies, and Almanacs

However much the Founders looked to journalists as educators, they realized that newspapers would generally cater to, rather than change, the tastes and interests of their readers. Newspapers were simply too dependent on the public to keep them in business. Hence it was essential to cultivate in the citizens a habit of reading good books, and the best way to do this was to make serious literature freely available through public libraries. Franklin and Jefferson shared a keen interest in libraries, perhaps because they each combined a warm sympathy for the common people with a thirst for knowledge and a gift for self-instruction. Jefferson, always a connoisseur of libraries, laid the foundation for the great Library of Congress in 1814 with the sale of his own collection of six thousand books. As early as 1779, he had drafted a bill for a public library in Richmond, to be dedicated to the "learned and curious," which he describes in his autobiography as an integral part of his plan for education in Virginia.[24] This bill, like many others, ran aground on the Virginia legislature's flinty stinginess. Franklin had succeeded in a similar venture by carrying the idea of self-help one step further and raising funds from the library's future users. The effort prospered even better when he presented the plan as originating with this group of readers, rather than putting himself forward as the author of his own project. But this bit of strategic modesty did not prevent him from boasting about the library's success years later.

> The Institution soon manifested its Utility, was imitated by other Towns and in other Provinces; the Librarys were augmented by Donations, Reading became fashionable, and our People having no publick Amusements to divert their Attention from Study became better acquainted with Books, and in a few Years were observ'd by Strangers to be better instructed and more intelligent than People of the same Rank generally are in other Countries.

There had been other lending libraries in America before Franklin established his in 1731, but most were religious both in origin and in the bulk of their holdings. Franklin's was the first subscription library, and its initial collection was perhaps unique in containing a mixture of classics and practical works, with no volumes of theology at all.[25]

Similar in motive were Franklin's exertions to form the American Philosophical Society. Entitling his 1743 plan "A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America," he explains that the drudgery of settling new colonies is essentially over and that there is time now for leisure and speculation. Yet the leisured activities he especially wishes to cultivate are

the making and promoting of useful discoveries. Thus his compendious list of topics for inquiry contains, together with mathematics, geology, and chemistry, such items as the discovery of useful plants, cider making, medicine, distillation, brewing, assaying of ores, labor-saving devices, trades, manufactures, surveying, animal husbandry, gardening, "and all philosophical experiments that let light into the nature of things, tend to increase the power of man over matter, and multiply the conveniences or pleasures of life." The society was to be a focus for correspondence, publish regular reports and transactions, and communicate with the Royal Society of London and the Dublin Society. Though the original organization soon faltered and was revived only in 1767, it was significant as one of a growing number of societies—scientific, agricultural, medical, and commercial—that sprang up in the years before and after independence and that embodied the spirit of self-help most clearly exemplified by Franklin himself.[26]

Self-help was also the theme of Franklin's educational efforts at the other end of the intellectual scale. With *Poor Richard's Almanac*, he found an admirable means of reaching the many Americans who were barely literate (and in the process, he admits cheerfully, turning a tidy profit for himself). Almanacs were the one volume besides the Bible that virtually every farm family owned, and Franklin's was an instant and enduring success during the quarter-century that he published it. As he explains:

> I consider'd it as a proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People, who bought scarce any other Books. I therefore filled all the little Spaces that occurr'd between the Remarkable Days in the Calendar, with Proverbial Sentences, chiefly such as inculcated Industry and Frugality, as the Means of procuring Wealth and thereby securing Virtue, it being more difficult for a Man in Want to act always honestly, as (to use here one of those proverbs) *it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright.*[27]

The sayings that filled the almanac came, as he acknowledges, from many other writers, but Franklin gave them their memorable phrasing and selected them to illuminate his characteristic refrain of virtue as the surest path to happiness. Here, more than in the *Autobiography*, Franklin addresses himself to the common person of modest talents and modest means, and his sayings are well adapted to this audience. Together the aphorisms constitute a running attack on idleness, vanity, and foolish pride, an encouragement never to envy the great and glorious, and a call to the solid and attainable respectability that rests on self-knowledge, self-reliance, industry, and thrift. There is a subtle balance between his praise of contentment with one's lot and his praise of hard work, as there is between the hope of prosperity he holds out and his gentle denigrating of mere wealth unaccompanied by justice and generosity. Because of their frag-

mentary and occasionally contradictory nature, these sayings lead one to wonder whether there is a deeper organizing principle to Franklin's moral world. In particular, they raise the question of the relation of means to ends. If industry and frugality are "the means of procuring wealth and thereby securing virtue," what is this ultimate virtue at which prudence aims? Does it point beyond self-interest to something higher, or is it simply self-interest in a richer and more expansive form? This question will be a central theme of the next three chapters.