JUST WHAT DOES HIPPO HAVE TO DO WITH PHILADELPHIA?

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THE QUESTION OF WISDOM and, more particularly of how to educate for wisdom, can be approached in a relatively accessible way through the traditional distinction between wisdom and knowledge. To know is surely not an unimportant accomplishment, but to seek wisdom is to suggest as an end something which is higher, more complete, and ultimately more satisfying and more profound. Aristotle's 'wise man', for example, is the individual who searches for an expected unity amidst the apparent multiplicity in our world.[1]

Seeking wisdom is usually an attempt to move beyond the immediate and the obvious and to pursue some 'larger' meaning. For instance, does it all make sense somehow? Life? Hope? Friendship? These issues are the quarry of the would-be wise man or woman. Or, more formally: are there first causes and/or some overarching and foundational order which can provide an authentic context or contextualisation for knowable facts? Is there 'Truth' or must one create one's own truth and identity, one's own grounding in reality? To discover unity or some architectonic reality, some reassuring pattern or frame for the world, is a persisting and common human desire. It is also a social impulse. Whether articulated in prose or poetry, art or science, or simply within one's own experience, there are many stories and narratives about this quest, this human longing to know and even to be wise, that seekers share with us. It is excusable, then, to look to some of these other seekers in order to begin our own quest, our own education for moving beyond knowledge and achieving wisdom.

1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book 1, chapter 2.

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Two individuals, separated by over 1,300 years and marked by very different personalities and interests, may offer us some insights into the serious relationship of knowledge and wisdom. They point out some directions as to where and how both things—but especially wisdom—may be encountered. Comparing their most celebrated texts suggests an opportunity for a specific and helpful consideration of 'educating for wisdom' in our current century.

This might all be framed by the simple, if arresting, question: just what does Hippo have to do with Philadelphia? How might a comparison of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and St Augustine's *Confessions* illuminate for us the difference, and also the relationship, between knowledge and wisdom? How does this comparison figure in a discussion of the 'good life', to which so many of us aspire but that many admit to be elusive? Such a comparison suggests, in the quest for the truly good life, a judicious reformulation of knowledge and wisdom as, more precisely, modesty and humility. To educate for wisdom, then, would be to approach the good life not through the modesty of a Franklin but, more fruitfully, through the humility of an Augustine. In the process, however, it would become clear that in Augustine's own experience education for wisdom must, paradoxically, be a gift.

Benjamin Franklin, ***by Joseph Siffre du Plessis***

Benjamin Franklin is one of Philadelphia's most celebrated sons. He considered himself an exemplary American, a judgment with which many of his countrymen, then and now, would agree. Kites, hundred-dollar bills and coonskin caps aside, Franklin remains a symbol of North American naturalness, innocence and common sense. His *Autobiography* presents a self-portrait as the quintessential practical man, busy in the backyard refining his Franklin stove—but also as a diplomat and statesman who responded with shrewdness and directness to the challenge of

helping to create a new republic. Businessman, politico, scientist, philanthropist, journalist …. Franklin is the everyman possible only in a New World unconstrained by the heavy hand of tradition and social inertia. His is the archetypical narrative of rags to riches, dependence to independence, the model of what is possible in a regime marked by good-natured scepticism and a celebrated openness to merit and achievement in preference to the luck of privileged birth.

Part 1 of his memoir was written in 1771, ostensibly composed to satisfy the curiosity of his son William about his own ancestry:

> Having emerg'd from the Poverty & Obscurity in which I was born & bred, to a State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro' Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducing Means I made use of, which with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.[2]

Here, as elsewhere in his *Autobiography*, Franklin leavens his success story with a measure of self-deprecating humour. He admits that recounting his personal story will have another purpose: 'And lastly, (I may as well confess it, since my Denial of it will be believ'd by no body) perhaps I shall a good deal gratify my own *Vanity*' (4). And it is a worthy tale, of course, given his various achievements (although the *Autobiography* is only able to bring the story into the 1750s, well before his services during and after the Revolutionary War).

The second of the four parts that make up Franklin's *Autobiography* was written in 1784 in Paris, where he had served his country quite well as a diplomat during the American Revolution. The manuscript of part 1 had obviously been read by several persons. Two of these had encouraged Franklin to continue his story, and their letters serve as a bridge between the first two parts of the *Autobiography*. Benjamin Vaughan, a British diplomat, writes that Franklin's 'history is so remarkable' that it must be told, and that it surely revealed 'the internal circumstances of your country' and the 'situation of *a rising* people' (73–74). But in an age of self-conscious Enlightenment, Vaughan discerned even more meaning in a presentation of the life of this American:

[2] Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, edited by Ormond Seavey (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 3 (subsequent quotations in the text).

> But these, Sir, are small reasons in my opinion, compared with the chance which your life will give for the forming of future great men; and in conjunction with your *Art of Virtue*, (which you design to publish) of improving the features of private character, and consequently of aiding all happiness both public and domestic (74).

Humble origins were no barrier to worthy success, and Franklin's social ascent proved that such a progress 'is in many a man's private power' and that well-motivated individuals could enjoy 'happiness, virtue, or greatness' (74, 76). And Franklin's secret?

> As no end likewise happens without a means, so we shall find, Sir, that even you yourself framed a plan by which you became considerable; but at the same time we may see that though the event is flattering, the means are as simple as wisdom could make them; that is, depending upon nature, virtue, thought, and habit (76).

It is in part 2 that Franklin offers his celebrated plan for 'the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection' (84). His 'Method' consisted of keeping track of his lack of progress in acquiring the virtues of temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility and chastity. Apparently Franklin was moved to add humility as a thirteenth virtue on his list only after 'a Quaker friend … inform'd me that I was generally thought Proud': he would seek to 'Imitate Jesus and Socrates' (94, 86). The overall task was more difficult to accomplish than Franklin had imagined, but he contented himself with the cheerful fact that 'I was by the Endeavour a better and a happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it' (92).

Franklin's effort to achieve moral perfection was forthrightly ecumenical: his plan would be useful to any religious sect and so he declined to mention any particular group. In both parts 2 and 3, Franklin offered a concise account of his own religious beliefs, likewise ecumenical and decidedly utilitarian:

> I never was without some religious Principles; I never doubted, for instance, the Existance of the Deity, that he made the World, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable Service of God was the doing Good to Man; that our Souls are immortal; and that all Crime will be punished and Virtue rewarded either here or hereafter; these I esteem'd the Essentials of every Religion, and being to be found in all the Religions we had in our Country I respected

> them all, tho' with different degrees of Respect as I found them more or less mix'd with other Articles which without any Tendency to inspire, promote or confirm Morality, serv'd principally to divide us and make us unfriendly to one another. (82)

Franklin admitted that, as a Deist, 'Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such', but he was willing, in a certain sense, to observe at least some of it with some seriousness:

> … I entertained an Opinion, that tho' certain Actions might not be bad because they were forbidden by it [Revelation], or good because it commanded them; yet probably those Actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial to us, in their own Natures, all the Circumstances of things considered. (59)

Or, as he stated his position more succinctly: 'vicious Actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the Nature of Man alone consider'd' (94).

Benjamin Franklin's self-consciously expansive religious creed, and his location of the seat of morality and moral virtue fundamentally in human nature, may be seen as liberating. What is accounted moral and moral excellence are not constricted by any peculiar sectarian claims grounded in some esoteric, special Revelation. In this Franklin anticipates the US First Amendment, according to which the federal government cannot establish any particular religion, or prevent the exercise of religious liberty by any of its citizens.[3]

Indeed Franklin's emphasis on the second great commandment—to love one's neighbour as oneself—rather than on the far more potentially volatile, though equally necessary, first great commandment—to love God in complete truth—is characteristic of the USA itself. Religion has been an active reality in the history of the United States, but the internecine religious struggles that beset human history have not arisen there in their most extreme forms. Franklin's decidedly utilitarian social and moral ethic is at the heart of the general US acceptance of religion

[3] This disestablishment of an official religion, coupled with a recognition of the validity of religious belief and sentiment, is consonant with Franklin's design for an end to sectarian squabbles as to the truth or falsity of particular beliefs. The official US way of religion would favour public neutrality as to creeds and suggest rather an emphasis on right living and mutual forbearance.

as a civil good when properly controlled and exercised, and mostly as a personal (and private) preference.[4]

Franklin seems early on in his life to have decided that, for the most part, he himself was the determiner of his destiny. Yes, God did exist, but human beings must take charge of the circumstances within which they found themselves. Good—neighbourly good—must come of this self-assertion, but we might rest comfortably in the truth of our existence: we were here to love self and to love neighbour and, in this way, to love a God about whom not much could really be known. God was obviously rational and willing to complement our successes in such human benevolence one to another. Beyond this we would encounter only the murk of sectarian claims about this or that 'truth' regarding the deity. And this murk would be a muddy obstacle to our natural obligation to love and help our neighbour. We need inquire no further into the intricacies of nature's God. To be a humanitarian, to be useful: this was the true calling of human beings, who ought not to dabble in inquiries and divine delicacies that could only lead, literally, nowhere. Religion was, yes, instrumental, and the doctrinal and dogmatic murk must fade before the sunny morning of benevolence, good cheer and our personal responsibility to act. The Golden Rule was a tried and true ethic. Franklin's dispassionate and utilitarian approach to religion may be seen as a form of wisdom, and one worth educating for. It is beneficial and enlivening to a nation of many faiths which might be tempted to many separatist aspirations.

For St Augustine, from the quite different context of ancient North Africa, true wisdom is also very different, and leads to an understanding of the good life that has its own consequences, personal and social. It is striking that both Franklin, throughout his life, and Augustine, in his youth, were ambitious men given to self-promotion. Moreover they were men of questions and not simply of achievement. How did we fit ourselves into this life? What was the purpose of living? How might we 'actualise' our potential? How did all of this affect our neighbours? Was there, perhaps, some sort of metanarrative available that transcended the simply human?

[4] As Daniel Boorstin suggested half a century ago, the US civic religion is at heart, and first of all, a personal and instrumental matter. What is in it for me? And so, what is in its presence, or absence, that serves each of us in our daily lives? See Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1958), 140–149.

Augustine was the Bishop of Hippo for over thirty years and was able, even while fully engaged as a pastor, to write prolifically and well. His *Confessions* and *The City of God* are accepted as monuments of Western civilisation. The *Confessions* is at heart an autobiography, and details Augustine's conversion after an early life of dissipation and selfishness. It is in human nature, according to Augustine, to acknowledge God, to seek to know God in truth and to praise God:

> The thought of you [God] stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.[5]

In his 'dark night of the soul', while he moved from a variety of heterodox forms of knowledge, ever circling an act of faith finally made in a garden, Augustine 'longed for a life of happiness' that seemed less and less within a person's own power to accomplish. Augustine had early on given himself up to pleasure and dissipation, and to the pursuits of fame and glory as a student and a rhetorician. Wrestling, as did Franklin, with what the latter referred to as 'venery', Augustine did court an Enlightenment freedom:

> I believed that continence was to be achieved by man's own power, which I knew that I did not possess. Fool that I was, I did not know that no man *can be master of himself, except of God's bounty*, as your Bible tells us. (128, italics original)

Dependence on God rather than on the self

Augustine's story is rather a tale of the relinquishment of self than an education in self-possession and self-constructed plans for moral perfection. Augustine was eventually able to recount his own sufferings, spiritual and emotional, as God's grace working on his self-possession and selfishness. He came to a recognition of the emptiness of worldly ambition and material joys that are centred on the self, adrift from their proper tethering to the Creator's plans: 'O Lord, you were turning me around to look at myself. For I had placed myself behind my own back, refusing to see myself.' (169) Augustine's self was famously disfigured by self-confessed sin but, importantly, self-knowledge pointed to the necessary and graced wisdom of true humility and an acceptance of dependence on God rather than on the self.

[5] Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 21 (subsequent quotations in the text).

St Augustine*, attributed to Caravaggio*

Here was authentic wisdom according to Augustine: a true knowledge of the self, a consequent recognition of our humble dependence on God alone, and a graced passion to know God in truth and justice. This was the opposite of the refusal 'to see myself'. And joined to this, within this authentic contextual truth of dependence on a merciful and just God, rested a liberating, if so often difficult, love of neighbour. But this love was really the fruit of the accepted love of a self which was, incredibly, first loved by God! This divinely ordained love of self, which would be transformed by grace into love of neighbour, could not truly be a self-ordained or self-possessed charity. The first love is from and within God. The old self, the self-contained self (even if God was acknowledged as part of the cosmic furniture) must die but, as Augustine realised: 'I was dying a death that would bring me life' (171). Sin continues to hamper the direct connection between such knowledge of the good life and willing it. In Augustine's own personal journey, a joyful and hard-won acceptance of dependence, not a declaration of independence, was offered by a smiling Continence herself:

> Can you not do [chastity] what these men and women do? Do you think they find the strength to do it in themselves and not in the Lord their God? It was the Lord their God who gave me to them. Why do you try to stand in your own strength and fail? Cast yourself upon God and have no fear. He will not shrink away and let you fall. Cast yourself upon him without fear, for he will welcome you and cure you of your ills. (176)

To compare Franklin's *Autobiography* and St Augustine's *Confessions*, then, is to confront an apparent paradox: the true human path,

according to a decidedly nonmodern Augustine, ought not to lead from dependence to independence, nor ought it to be an attractive, heroic path through a world of relative and endless possibilities. For even if there is a recognition of some sort of remote Creator or Force, the person following the seemingly heroic path is forever moving backward. The person of modern responsibility, the progressive person who does impressive things and has a rational and self-assured plan, is someone who has placed himself or herself 'behind my own back'. To the contrary, Augustine would identify the wise road as the naturally counter-intuitive way: it is to seek to move from independence to dependence. Here true freedom is found. This way of 'finding oneself by losing oneself' may be brought more readily into the light by consulting Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman and recasting Philadelphia's knowledge and Hippo's wisdom as, respectively, modesty and humility.

In *The Idea of a University*, Newman suggests that 'philosophical morality', which he presents as a gentlemanly, undemanding doctrine, is really the virtue of modesty. To be modest is to remain 'seated', according to Newman: 'the world's humility', or modesty, 'is a stooping indeed of the person, but a bending forward, unattended with any the slightest effort to leave by a single inch the seat in which it is so firmly established'.[6] Compared to the 'humility of the Gospel', modesty,

> … is the act of a superior, who protests to himself, while he commits it, that he is superior still, and that he is doing nothing else but an act of grace towards those on whose level, in theory, he is placing himself.[7]

In this telling, the modest person is still the 'superior' person: to deny this would be 'to his mind a meanness or an hypocrisy'.[8] Cloaked here is a self-satisfaction, the knowledge of a comforting hierarchal position above the other.

The 'humility of the Gospel', on the other hand, is 'to feel and to behave as if we were low; not, to cherish a notion of our importance, while we affect a low position'. This humility unseats us while we are …

> … placing ourselves in our thoughts on a level with our inferiors; it is not only a voluntary relinquishment of the privileges of our own

[6] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), 143.
[7] Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 143.
[8] Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 144.

> station, but an actual participation or assumption of the condition of those to whom we stoop.

Here we discover humility's 'grave and self-denying attributes': the direct challenge to our pride, which can actually survive the charm of modesty, a virtue which can remain chained to 'outward deportment'.[9]

One might argue, then, that knowledge and wisdom, recast as modesty and humility, are related but different, and to be educated in the one is not necessarily to be educated in the other. Benjamin Franklin may use the word *humility* to evoke a smile, given his admitted personal vanity about his accomplishments and role as a model of worldly success, but the more appropriate term in his 'plan for moral perfection' is *modesty*. To seek to be a 'wise man', then, would require leaving the comfort of the popular and the familiar for a radical and discomforting about-face in order to see the self hiding behind oneself.

It is, in its way, reassuring to appear to be in control (modestly, of course) of one's fortunes. But a wisdom that embraces the costly humility of authentic self-knowledge, an acknowledgement of dependence on God and a reality gracefully anchored in an acceptance of God's charity, Self-giving and forgiving, must be the goal of the 'wise man'. It is not just about faith, although faith is ultimately our grounding, but rather a simple matter of 'unseating' ourselves from a self-constructed—and modest—fantasy: the comfort of believing that a person is indeed his or her own measure. A simple matter? Not really, in terms of experience, of course, but the juxtaposition of Philadelphia knowledge (modesty) and Hippo wisdom (humility) may perhaps suggest a contemporary way of reanimating the needed dialogue between Creator and creature, and between creature and creature.

Ours is a time when, in the public square and maybe even within the Church, the modesty of even the well-intentioned—those who would recast the truths of the faith as simply metaphors dependent on, and acceptable to, current knowledge—must always give way in the end to a counter-intuitive wisdom which can only be discovered in humility:

> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

[9] Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 143.

> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:22–25)

To educate for wisdom, now as in the past, is no easy task. To confuse knowledge and wisdom is not simply a modern conceit: it has a long tradition, given the human desire not only to know but also to control and to fashion. Should Franklin and Augustine then simply square off and fire away, and to the victor will go the laurel of true wisdom? Perhaps it would be an interesting spectacle, but even if St Augustine were to win this particular duel (not a foregone conclusion), he might immediately recall the temptation to spiritual pride lurking in any contest regarding wisdom and knowledge:

> For though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (Romans 1:21–23)

To educate for wisdom is no easy task.

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