

The Art of Virtue

*"Here will I hold. If there's a power above us
(And that there is all nature cries aloud
Thro' all her works), He must delight in virtue;
And that which he delights in must be happy."*

from Addison's Cato

*"O vitae Philosophia dux!
O virtutum indagatrix expultrixque vitiorum!
Unus dies, bene et ex praeceptis tuis actus,
peccanti immortalitati est anteponeendus."*

Cicero

“It was about this time
I conceiv'd the bold and
arduous project of
arriving at moral perfection...”

*An excerpt from Chapter 6 of
The Autobiography
of Ben Franklin*

*Paraphrased, prepared, and printed
in the Philippine Islands
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Toward Moral Perfection

Now that I'm sort of old, and I have had some success in my life, a friend of mine suggested that I explain how I was able to achieve as much as I have.

Well to start with, I always read as much as possible. I read anything I can find and I don't party too much. I must say, I did sow my wild oats, but thank Goodness it didn't become a way of life. Anyway, I always liked reading.

But it really started when I decided seriously to try to become perfect. I wanted to be perfect. And I figured I could do it. Yup. I knew it might be hard to get there, but if possible, I wanted to live without ever doing anything wrong.

All over the world the old books and old people say mostly the same things. It seems to me that when they say something is "bad" (lying, cheating, stealing, etc.) they're really saying that according to experience, it's proved after thousands of generations, that you will be happier if you do the "right" things, and don't do the "wrong" things. Or to put it another way, if God made us then he wants us to be happy. So he would definitely set it up so that if we just do what is right, and don't do anything wrong, then we would be happy. So if I already know how to be happy, I should try to be as happy as possible. It just seemed kind of obvious.

I usually did things that were wrong because I like them so much, or because everyone else was doing it. But I figure since I always pretty much knew when I did something wrong, no reason why I couldn't simply do the right thing instead!

Well it turned out to be harder than I thought. I could guard against a bad habit, but only if I paid attention all the time. And if I paid attention to one habit all the time, I'd screw up on a different bad habit! Another problem, even though I would try really hard, sometimes the temptation was too much and I'd simply fail, even though I was trying hard.

I found that just because I *thought* I could always choose the right thing, and then *try* really hard to do it, it didn't mean I would always be successful. So it seemed like the secret was habits. I'd have to break bad habits and make them into good habits. After that, then I could try to see how close I could get to being perfect. So I thought up a plan.

I read a lot of different stuff growing up and I ran into a lot of different lists and lectures and sermons of what's good and bad. Some were short and general, and some were long and specific. For my project I made a list of all the good habits I could think of, from all the stuff I read, and threw out the duplicates. I kept them specific enough to be clear with just a short phrase attached, and it boiled down to 13:

Basically Thirteen Virtues

1. **Temperance.** I enjoy food but I'm not a hog. I'll have a drink but I won't get drunk.
2. **Silence.** I don't gossip or say anything bad about other people.
3. **Order.** I keep things straightened up and schedule my time.
4. **Resolution.** I do what I say I will do.
5. **Frugality.** I don't spend money on anything unless it does some good. I don't waste anything.
6. **Industry.** I don't waste time. I only do things that are useful.
7. **Sincerity.** I don't lie. I think the best about people, but if I have to speak my mind for their benefit, then I better do it.
8. **Justice.** I don't lie, cheat, or steal, and I always do my part.
9. **Moderation.** If I am hurt, even intentionally, I don't overreact.
10. **Cleanliness.** I have a clean body, clean clothes, and a clean house.
11. **Tranquility.** I don't worry about small stuff, or things I can't control.
12. **Chastity.** I only use sex for health and babies. I have a good reputation.
13. **Humility.** I imitate Jesus and Socrates.

The opposite of all these things are bad habits. So my plan was to make each one into my good habit. But there's no way I could do them all at once because it takes time and energy to make a new habit. So I planned to do them one at a time, and once I had one down, then work on the next one, one by one, until I had them all.

Of course, getting certain habits would help with getting certain other ones. So I spent a while thinking about the most strategic order to do them in, and finally decided on the order, above.

I put Temperance first, because it helped me think clearly, which is important if I always have to keep my guard up against old bad habits and just plain old temptation. Once I had Temperance, Silence would be easier. Like I said, I always like reading and learning, and Silence is good for that. I thought I might as well learn and read at the same time I am trying this project of becoming perfect. Plus, I was getting into the habit of joking around all the time, being pointlessly clever, and talking about fun silly stuff, and I noticed that that just made me hang out with silly people. So that's why I put Silence second.

My plan was that the combination of Order and Silence would give me more time to concentrate on my project and to study.

I had to make Resolution one of the first ones too, since it obviously would help keep me from giving up on any of the following virtues, or even the whole project! Frugality and Industry, next, would get me out of debt and hopefully help me make some decent money so that Sincerity and Justice would be easier. Etc.

So I made a little 13-page calendar book to keep with me and help with my self-examination. Each page had a different virtue listed at the top, along with the little description. Then on every page I listed all 13 virtues, and made a column for each day of the week. So whatever page I was on, that's the thing I would concentrate on for the week. If I failed in that habit then I'd pencil a little black dot in the box for whatever day it was. I also kept track of the other 12 virtues and put dots in when I messed up on those, but the goal for *that* week was to have a whole clean row for the virtue page I was on. Then the next week I would concentrate on the next virtue because I'd already be a little better at the previous one. So a course would take 13 weeks. And I could do about 4 courses in a year. Hopefully after a while, I would be able to finish a whole 13-week course with no dots, which would prove that I was getting near my goal of being perfect.

*"O Powerful Goodness! Bountiful Father!
Merciful Guide!*

*Increase in me that wisdom which
discovers my truest interest.*

*Strengthen my resolutions
to perform what that wisdom dictates.*

*Accept my kind offices to thy other children
as the only return in my power
for thy continual favors to me."*

"Father of light and life, thou Good Supreme!

O teach me what is good; teach me Thyself!

Save me from folly, vanity, and vice,

From every low pursuit; and fill my soul

With knowledge, conscious peace, and virtue pure;

Sacred, substantial, never-fading bliss!"

I knew I'd have to work at it and think about it every single day, so I put some quotes in the front of the book to remind me why I'm doing this, what great footsteps I'm following, and sort of keep me on track.

And since God likes wisdom, I figured he would be happy to help me in my project, so I put 2 little prayers in there too.

Of course to get Order I had to have a schedule, so I designed a schedule and also put that in.

Well, after I set up this plan, I went for it! (I took a break once in a while.) And I was surprised; once I started paying attention, I had more faults than I thought! But, I did notice them becoming less, which is a very satisfying feeling.

After a while I only did one course a year, and then I got so busy with stuff I only did the course every few years. Eventually I had so much going on, business, traveling, projects, etc., I didn't even do it anymore, but I always had my little book on me.

For me, Order was the toughest. It might not be so hard if I was a lumberjack and I could make my own schedule, but when I have to deal with other people and make my schedule around them, it's a lot harder.

But I also had trouble just keeping stuff organized. I never had to be too organized growing up because I have a pretty good memory and I could always find stuff even if it was messy. So I never really thought about how much better things would work if they were organized. It was so hard for me to try to get the habit of Order! I would only make a little progress, and then slide back and get messy again all the time.

I seriously almost gave up. I'd make excuses like, "Oh well, it's ok, I'll just have one fault. Perfect would be too perfect! It's better to have a couple problems." Or "Well if I'm too perfect then people will hate me." Or, "It's not fair to my friends if I'm too perfect." To tell you the truth, I was really horrible at Order! Now I'm 79, and my memory is not as good, and I wish I had tried harder on that one.

Overall though, the result was, of course, I never became perfect even though I started out thinking I could make it. Ha! Nowhere near perfect. But I'm definitely happier, and a better man than I would have been if I didn't even try. I did get pretty good at most of the virtues.

As an experiment it was a great success. I definitely recommend it, and hope my kids will do it. I'm really glad I did it. I'm so glad.

Thanks to Temperance I'm still strong and healthy.

Thanks to Industry and Frugality, I made some decent money pretty early in life, which made it easier and easier as I lived on, and I got a good reputation as a good citizen. I think because of those two things, I got to hang out with smart and powerful people.

Thanks to Sincerity and Justice, I made it as a politician and ambassador.

And thanks to the combination of all 13, at least as much as I had, I was cool and confident. People asked me for advice. Even younger people liked talking to me, which is pretty cool since they don't usually like hanging out with old dudes.

By the way, notice that there is no religion in the plan! I did that on purpose because I believed in the plan so much, I wanted it to be usable by anyone in any religion. I was also going to publish it. I planned to write a little comment about the advantages of each of the virtues, and the dangers of having the opposite habit. I was going to call it The Art Of Virtue because it basically shows you *how* to become virtuous instead of just telling you to be good (like a lot of preachers).

I never got around to publishing it, but I remember a couple of the main points I wanted to put in. One is, like I said before, that doing a “bad” thing is not bad just because old books say not to do it. It's that old books say not to do it *because it's already proved that it will hurt* either you or someone else.

So if you want to be happy, which everyone does, then everyone in the world should try to be virtuous, because happiness will be the result.

I was also going to stress to young people that there's a lot of rich and powerful people in the world, and all of them need honest smart people to manage their businesses and projects, and honest smart people are rare, so... "Nothing so likely to make a man's fortune as virtue."

Originally, I only had 12 virtues. But a friend of mine let me know that most people thought I was sort of conceited and said it was obvious when I was talking to people because I wasn't satisfied just being right but I always had to rub it in. (And he proved it by giving me a few examples!) I decided I was going to cure that. So I added Humility as the 13th virtue.

To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I was able to get much real Humility, but I did make it look like I did. I just made a strict rule for myself to never directly go against anyone's idea, and never insist I'm so right.

In fact, I made sure I never used absolute words like certainly, undoubtedly, etc., and instead said, "I think", "I believe", or "I imagine" or "at the moment it seems to me." Even if somebody was totally, provably wrong, I didn't let myself jump on them. I'd just start saying that "in certain cases or circumstances yes, definitely, you'd be right, but in this case it seems to me there's a difference."

After I started doing this I definitely noticed a difference. It was a big advantage. Not only did conversations go better, but my ideas got accepted more because people weren't so eager to prove me wrong. And in an argument, if I was right, it was easier to get the other guy to admit it and come on my side.

It was tough to convert my speech to this habit, but I did get good success with that. I bet no one has heard me say anything insulting for 50 years. I think this habit, added on top of my integrity (gained from getting better at the virtues) is the main thing that helped me get my plans and proposals past people and committees. And when I had to present them by giving a speech, even though I'm not good at speeches, I usually got my points across pretty convincingly.

In my opinion, Humility is probably the hardest virtue to get, because no matter how much you beat down your pride, it's still alive, so it peeks out once in a while. For example, you probably see it in this writing! I mean, even if I totally became 100% humble... I'd be proud of that.

Ben

Temperance.

*I enjoy food but I'm not a hog.
I'll have a drink but I won't get drunk.*

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Silence

*I don't gossip or say anything bad
about other people.*

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Order

*I keep things straightened up
and schedule my time.*

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Resolution

I do what I say I will do.

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Frugality

I don't spend money on anything unless it does some good. I don't waste anything.

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Industry

I don't waste time.

I only do things that are useful.

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Sincerity

I don't lie. I think the best about people, but if I have to speak my mind for their benefit, then I better do it.

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Justice

*I don't lie, cheat, or steal,
and I always do my part.*

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Moderation

*If I am hurt, even intentionally,
I don't overreact.*

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Cleanliness

*I have a clean body, clean clothes,
and a clean house.*

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Tranquility

*I don't worry about small stuff,
or things I can't control.*

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Chastity

I only use sex for health and babies.

I have a good reputation.

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Humility

I imitate Jesus and Socrates.

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<p>MORNING.</p> <p>Question: What good shall I do this day?</p>	<p>5am - 8am</p>	<p>Get up, shower, and greet Powerful Goodness! Plan the day. Pick a Resolution for the day. Study, and breakfast.</p>
	<p>8am - 11am</p>	<p>Work.</p>
<p>NOON.</p>	<p>Noon - 2pm</p>	<p>Read, pay bills, eat.</p>
	<p>2pm - 6pm</p>	<p>Work.</p>
<p>EVENING.</p> <p>Question: What good have I done today?</p>	<p>6pm - 10pm</p>	<p>Put stuff away. Eat. Hang out, kick back. Think about my day. Fill in the dots!</p>
<p>NIGHT.</p>	<p>10pm - 5am</p>	<p>Sleep.</p>

*"Length of days is in her right hand,
and in her left hand riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace."*

Solomon 3:16-17 on wisdom or virtue

*Never suffer sleep to close thy eyelids,
after thy going to bed,
Till thou hast examined by thy reason
all thy actions of the day.
Wherein have I done amiss? What have I done?
What have I omitted that I ought to have done?
If in this examination thou find
that thou hast done amiss,
reprimand thyself severely for it;
And if thou hast done any good, rejoice.*

Pythagoras, Golden Verses



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I found that just because I *thought* I could always choose the right thing, and then *try* really hard to do it, it didn't mean I would always be successful. So it seemed like the secret was habit. I'd have to break bad habits and make them into good habits. After that, then I could try to see how close I could get to being perfect. So I thought up a plan.

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*"Father of light and life, thou Good Supreme!
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Save me from folly, vanity, and vice,
From every low pursuit; and fill my soul
With knowledge, constant peace, and virtue pure;
Sated, substantial, never-fading bliss!"*

*"O Powerful Goodness! Bountiful Father!
Merciful Guide!
Increase in me that wisdom which
discovers my truest interest.
Strengthen my resolutions
to perform what that wisdom dictates.
Accept my kind offers to thy other children
as the only return in my power
for thy continual favors to me."*

*"Here will I hold. If there's a power above us
(And that there is all nature cries aloud
Thro' all her works), He must delight in virtue;
And that which delights in must be happy."*

from Addison's Cato

*"O vitae Philosophia dux!
O virtutum indagatrix: expultrixque vitiorum!
Unus dies, bene et ex praeceptis tuis actus,
peccanti immortalitati est anteponeendus."*

Cicero

After I started doing this I definitely noticed a difference. It was a big advantage. Not only did conversations go better, but my ideas got accepted more because people weren't so eager to prove me wrong. And in an argument, if I was right, it was easier to get the other guy to admit it and come on my side.

It was tough to convert my speech to this habit, but I did get good success with that. I bet no one has heard me say anything insulting for 50 years. I think this habit, added on top of my integrity (gained from getting better at the virtues) is the main thing that helped me get my plans and proposals past people and committees. And when I had to present them by giving a speech, even though I'm not good at speeches, I usually got my points across pretty convincingly.

In my opinion, Humility is probably the hardest virtue to get, because no matter how much you beat down your pride, it's still alive, so it peeks out once in a while. For example, you probably see it in this writing! I mean, even if I totally became 100% humble... I'd be proud of that.

Ben

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Chastity
*I only use sex for health and babies.
 I have a good reputation.*

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Sincerity
*I don't lie. I think the best about people,
 but if I have to speak my mind for their
 benefit, then I better do it.*

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Justice
*I don't lie, cheat, or steal,
 and I always do my part.*

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Tranquility
*I don't worry about small stuff,
 or things I can't control.*

MORNING.		Get up, shower, and greet Powerful Goodness! Plan the day. Pick a Resolution for the day. Study, and breakfast.
Question: What good shall I do this day?	5am - 8am	
	8am - 11am	Work.
NOON.	Noon - 2pm	Read, pay bills, eat.
	2pm - 6pm	Work.
EVENING.		Put stuff away. Eat. Hang out, kick back. Think about my day. Fill in the dots!
Question: What good have I done today?	6pm - 10pm	
NIGHT.	10pm - 5am	Sleep.

Resolution

I do what I say I will do.

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Order

*I keep things straightened up
and schedule my time.*

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*"Length of days is in her right hand,
and in her left hand riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace."
Solomon 3:16-17 on wisdom or virtue*

*Never suffer sleep to close thy eyelids,
after thy going to bed,
Till thou hast examined by thy reason
all thy actions of the day.
Wherein have I done amiss? What have I done?
What have I omitted that I ought to have done?
If in this examination thou find
that thou hast done amiss,
reprimand thyself severely for it;
And if thou hast done any good, rejoice.
Pythagoras, Golden Verses*