

An Exemplification of American Pragmatism in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

Ting Hu¹

¹ College of Foreign languages, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

Correspondence: Ting Hu, College of Foreign Languages, Southwest University, Beibei, Chongqing, 400715, China. Tel: 86-152-1334-7591. E-mail: 1242554197@qq.com

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Abstract

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) is the most accomplished American of his age and renowned as “The First American”. He has made great contributions in the fields of American education, science, diplomacy and economy. In his *Autobiography*, it portrays a story of a man from rags to riches, which reveals the pragmatic spirit. The pragmatism spirit in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* deeply relates to his life experience and social macro environment in the 18th American context. Franklin's pragmatism embodies in the evaluation criteria of practical benefits, experimental approach and prevalent orientation for human progress. This kind of pragmatism has been deeply related to his life experience but also rooted in profound historical and cultural background, which exerts a far-reaching influence on the American pragmatism and formation of American national character.

Keywords: Benjamin Franklin, pragmatism, experimental approach, Puritanism

1. Introduction

As an exemplary self-reliant man, Benjamin Franklin was a man of many accomplishments. As a scientist, he discovered the electricity, invented many practical products including the lightning rod, the Franklin stove; as a moralist, he was best recognized for the thirteen virtues for moral perfection, which encouraged self-discipline including the industry, frugality and other virtues; as a civil activist, he facilitated many civil organizations and engaged in public affairs, including establishing a community fire department and the first public library. People highly respect the great person and his profound influence upon American people can get a glimpse from coinage, money and the names of many towns, counties, companies and education institutions. In the American history, he was a profoundly influential American whose contributions changed the beginnings and future landscape of the country's various fields.

Numerous studies have researched on this great man. The secret of his success naturally becomes the research object. Studies about Benjamin Franklin are more about his life, his political and scientific and diplomatic achievements. For instance, Xuesheng Yuan has written the book *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and American Spirit*, and Peijun Zhao's paper, *The Research on Benjamin Franklin's Thoughts of Science and Technology*, it studies Benjamin Franklin's science and technology thoughts; Lihua Zhang, she explores *The Utilitarian Educational Thought of Franklin and its Effect*, which is studied from the education view. Leonard W. Labaree's work, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, which reveals the thoughts of Franklin through the collection of his letters. Professor H. W. Brands, he depicts the life story in the book: *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*; James Campbell, *Recovering Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service*, he tries to identify Franklin as pragmatist. All these studies give the rare material for the exploration of Benjamin Franklin's pragmatic spirit.

From these studies above, more studies emphasize the political and scientific or other obvious achievements; there is no relatively exclusive study about exploration and analysis of pragmatic spirit in the autobiography and its influence on American people. The paper tries to explore the pragmatism in the *Autobiography*, uncovers the hidden reasons and sources of the times, sets up a clear image of pragmatic Benjamin Franklin for the readers and also explores its influence on American history. This study is worthwhile, since pragmatism is carried out all through the America and contributed greatly in the formation the United States of America. So that we can get a clear picture of America in the 18th century and understand the character of American people better.

Based on the requirements of the paper, it adopts the methods of literature review, the text analysis and history description, using text comparison and analysis to dig out the deep resources of Benjamin Franklin's pragmatic spirit, and then it analyzes the life of Benjamin Franklin and the manifestations of pragmatics spirits in the *Autobiography*. In the end, it uses the inductive research to conclude the influence of Benjamin Franklin's pragmatic spirits.

2. Benjamin Franklin's Life and America in 18th Century

No one's success occurs in a vacuum. It closely relates to certain background of times and his personal life experience. Franklin was born in the eighteenth century when America was witnessing fast economic development, a surge of capitalism. Franklin is eager to engage in public affairs which would undoubtedly influenced by his times. The following part elaborates his life experience and general environments of his time.

In one's life, family influence is no doubt fundamental and exerts a profound influence upon one's life. Franklin was born in a typical Puritan family. His ancestors in England were in favor of reformation, in *Autobiography* it describes his ancestor, Thomas Francklyne, "had got an English Bible, and to conceal and secure it, it was fastened open with Tapes under and within the frame of a joint stool." and "one of the children stood at the door to give notice." (Franklin, 1869, p. 82) It is the serious prosecution of the Anglican Church that made Franklin's father move to America, hoping to enjoy their mode of religion. And Franklin's father who is a pious Puritan cultivated virtues in business and family management. And he was also a respected figure in their community. People consulted with him about a lot of issues. In the childhood and teenage years, Franklin was influenced by these Puritan virtues and expected to be a socially recognized figure which largely influenced his interests in public affairs.

The pragmatic spirit of Benjamin Franklin was closely associated with his personal life experience and his success. Franklin grew up in a poor family in Boston. He was the 15th child of his family, and he had to confront the life problems since he was a kid. What matters are the practical results for improving himself and bringing about happiness. When he was 10 years old, he dropped the school and was employed in the family trade business. When he was 12, he became an apprentice in the brother's print house. In this period, apart from mastering the skill of printing, he was industrious and diligent in reading and writing, and read extensively including literature, history, philosophy. At the same time he studied the math and four foreign languages, and focused on his attention on writing. When he was 16, he pressed some papers on the *New England Courant*. All of these have laid a solid foundation for his numerous accomplishments. In 1723, he broke the manacles of the contract between him and his brother, without the least recommendation to or knowledge of, any person in the place, with little money, went to Philadelphia. After several setbacks, he established his own print house. As he adept at the management and attached great emphasis to credibility, practiced with the virtue of industriousness and frugality, he not only got his position in the fierce competition of printing, but also expanded his business to several neighbor states, emerging as a renowned figure in the press industry in North America. Benjamin Franklin relied on his own endeavors and talents to succeed, exemplifying the America was land of promises, who became a typical example of a man from rags to riches.

Besides Franklin's life experience, the emergence of Benjamin Franklin's pragmatic spirit was generally in collection with political and religion reasons. To begin with, it is associated with the history of European immigrants to new continent. Lack of life necessities and labor, the practical technique was highly valued as it can reduce the risks of real life. Puritanism has been one of sources for the pragmatic spirits of Benjamin Franklin. For the influence of family, Benjamin Franklin accepted the puritan when he was very young, and this faith has exerted a far reaching influence on his life. Actually, Franklin had little interest in religion. When he was young, he claimed himself an atheist and later declared he was a Deist, without any particular church. Later, in his many remarks, he clarified that he only considered the religious belief with pragmatic consequences. Almost all the early immigrants are puritans, in the colonial period, the primary task for the immigrants is to make their living and get fortunes. All the things are different from the European continent, not only the geography conditions and the climate, but also the Indians who are both friends and enemies. These immigrants take the religion as the spiritual support and comfort, conceiving themselves as the chosen people, to build the truly promise land in the American land. The realities they face are consistent with the Puritanism. Puritanism are putting emphasis on the conception of bounden duty, that is to say, man's responsibility is to bring their talents into full play, as the talents are bestowed on people, so they should try their best to develop, not to satisfy their status quo. This kind of belief breaks the psychology barrier of the development of capitalism (that is the negative opinion towards fortunes), so that redefining that acquisition of the wealth from labor is the responsibility for the God. It is their environment that forces them to face the reality, attaching more importance to practical purposes so that they could deal with all these pragmatic problems.

The pragmatic spirit has been agreed with the development of capitalism. Although the fortunes has been the symbol of honor, the Puritanism did not encourage the extravagant spending, all the entertainments and consumption beyond the necessities of life were regarded as the evil. This kind of the asceticism has deeply influenced and contributed a lot to the development of capitalism of North America. The frugality of asceticism brought about the capital accumulation and Puritanism has played a great part in the development of capitalism. In the book *A History of American Literature*, "With his restless energy, his optimism and his innovative spirit, Franklin exemplifies the age of Enlightenment or what Franklin himself called the age of experiment, he had faith in human accomplishment and progress. He believed that an individual, with industry and thrift, will improve himself and his community." (Ming, 2002, p. 45). Therefore, the newly bourgeoisie and people are in favor of the pragmatic spirit of Benjamin Franklin and it became the mainstream theology of the society. Actually, at the middle of 18th century, the thirteen states were established gradually and the economy of the North America is developing rapidly. After the Independent War against the Britain, the union of thirteen states laid a solid foundation for the development of capitalism. In the development of capitalism, the capitalist system requires the dedication for the money, which was the matched attitude towards the wealth with the capitalist system and also closely related with living environment of survival in the economic struggle. At this environment, people's business and social benefits determined their opinions and attitudes, the bourgeoisie agreed with Benjamin Franklin's idea and gradually established such views: as long as it is legal, fortunes are the fruits and manifestation of occupation virtues and abilities. Also that we can see Franklin retained all the virtues and faiths, Franklin began publishing *Poor Richard's Almanac* on December 28, 1732, in the Poor Prichard's words, Benjamin Franklin represented a historical shift in emphasis from Providence to the individual, from afterlife to this life. Just as the Weber says, Franklin's success was exemplified the new era—the power of economic and politic shifted from the downfallen aristocrats to the vibrant and intelligent capital class. Therefore, he became the spokesman of the new era.

3. Pragmatism Spirit in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

Pragmatism is originated from Greek *πράγμα*. According to the etymology, its original meaning is "conduct", then extends its meaning to "practice". Pragmatism has been emerged as a systematic philosophy in the end of 19th century. Charles Sanders Peirce puts forward the term "Pragmatism" when he elaborates his philosophy; other founding ancestors of American pragmatism include William James, Chauncey Wright, John Fiske, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, Nicholas St. John Green, and Joseph Bangs Warner. The gist of pragmatism is the pragmatist maxim, which serves as a criterion for settling the contents of hypotheses by tracing their practical consequences. It is also called experimentalism and instrumentalism, its fundamental spirit is that being against theory speculation, attaching much importance to the practice and the practical purpose. In other words, the truth or meaning of an idea or a proposition rests with its visible practical consequences rather than anything metaphysical. To pragmatists, all the things are tested by their practical efficacy. In the Peirce's book, "Issues of Pragmatism", there is an important description of the "Pragmatic maxim", Pragmatism was originally explained in the form of a maxim, as follows: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, you conceive the objects of your conception to have. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object." (Peirce, 1905, p. 481)

Therefore, all pragmatists hold the opinion that attaching more importance on the action and practice; they take the practice as the main method and the practical purpose as the highest goal. Hence, the pragmatism is also called "Experientialism" or "Instrumentalism". Pragmatism is the first philosophy in the America land, its emergence and development deeply influences American values.

Generally speaking, there are some features of pragmatism.

In the book *Pragmatism* (1907), William James proposes three features of pragmatism: 1) the purpose and outcomes outweigh theory and pure reason; 2) the purpose and realizations of aims are heightening; 3) pluralism, variation and novelty are more emphasized. Malachowski identifies pragmatism by confining to its essential part, "the ubiquity of the practical." pragmatism should be viewed as an account of the way people put forward ideas, choose beliefs, and make decisions. John Ryder considers pragmatism as materialism, believing that "the valuable ideas are those that make a difference somewhere, and are capable of effecting change and solving problems." (Ryder, 2004, p. 15) Scott L. Pratt perceives pragmatism in four aspects: 1) objects interact with one another in an eternal way; 2) the world is pluralistic; 3) community is the best way to realize human benefits; and 4) human are always advancing.

From the definition and explanations mentioned, pragmatists view the things from its pragmatic benefits, utilize an experimental approach to test the things so that it could get most pragmatic results and they are endeavored to

pursue human advancement.

The author of the paper tries to uncover Franklin's pragmatism from following perspectives, i.e., its evaluation criteria: pragmatic benefits, its experimental approaches to real life and prevalent orientation for human progress. This *Autobiography* is a story of well accomplished life which includes three parts, Part One depicts Franklin as a young man in Boston and Philadelphia, Part Two is the renowned "art of virtue" section. In this section, Franklin gives an account of his youthful attempt to attain "moral perfection." Part Three uncovers how Franklin practices his principles of conduct in order to perform his roles and engaged in diversified causes. For the convenience of statement, the author of this paper tries to figure out its pragmatism in following three aspects.

First, use pragmatic benefits to evaluate conduct. What Franklin conducts has obviously due to its pragmatic benefits, he considers the realization of aims as the pivotal element when he makes his decision. At the beginning of the *Autobiography*, he attributed his success to proper means he led: "Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life, with a considerable share of felicity t, the conducting 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." (Franklin, 1869, p. 10)

The pragmatism was the life philosophy of Benjamin Franklin; it is the *Autobiography's* pragmatic value that leads this great figure to spare his time to accomplish such a work. Just as the scholar Zall says, "Franklin's purpose is to use a method of great advantage to others to tell his life story, hence he writes himself as a well recognized one and expects that he would be as a model to be imitated." (Zall, 1989, p. 8)

Second, utilize experimental approaches to real life. Franklin considers practical results as the maxim of his conduct and applied experimental approaches to test its effects. Because pragmatists are against all forms of absolutism and convince that all principles should be considered as working hypotheses which must be exemplified in lived experience. Franklin utilized an experimental approach to cultivate virtues as these virtues would enhance his business, improve his efficiency and get along with people better. Just as he said in the *Autobiography*, "I should, from this circumstance, have endeavored to convince young person that no qualities were so likely to make a poor man's fortune as those of probity and integrity." (Franklin, 1869, p. 228)

In order to arrive at the moral perfection, he conceived and practiced a bold and arduous project of thirteen virtues and acquired the habitude of all the virtues gradually. In the book, he exposed his method to attain moral perfection: "not attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time, and when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on till I should have gone through the thirteen." (Franklin, Franklin, & Duane, 1859, p. 34) In a word, he not only tells others to follow these virtues but also he designed a plan to practice with a circle of 13 weeks so that he could cultivate his character gradually. Max Weber has remarked that Benjamin Franklin's 13 virtues are full of pragmatism. Franklin convinced that happiness relies on the success of the economy in the first place, he is also optimistic that this can be achieved by normal Americans who lived modestly, and stayed alert to seize every opportunity for actual progress. All these revealed that he applied the experimental approach to direct his life in a rational manner.

Third, prevalent orientation for pragmatic benefits is human progress. When it comes to pragmatic benefits, pragmatists share the same orientation that conduct must lead to practical benefits which could improve human society. Guided by this principle, he was more concerned about public affairs. During the 1730s and 1740s, Franklin noticed that books are scarce and expensive; he initiated the nation's first lending library by gathering all members' books. He came up with scheme for an Academy, which was later known as the University of Pennsylvania and he also founded an "American philosophical society" in 1743 in order to enable learned people to discuss their discoveries and learn about each other. Besides, as fire was a nerve-racking problem for Philadelphians, Franklin tried to settle this problem by establishing the first fire company and the first fire insurance company to ensure safety. In James Campbell's work *Recovering Benjamin Franklin: An Exploration of a Life of Science and Service*, he highlights his Pragmatism as Franklin addressed problems in a cooperative way, attaching the importance of duty and responsibility which forms the criteria of evaluating the practical consequences to action.

He sold his business in 1748 in order to get leisure for study since he has already acquired comparative wealth; and in a several years he made discoveries which earned him a reputation with the learned throughout the Europe. Among his various inventions, the lightning rod which he invented has the pragmatic utility as it protected buildings from lightning damage. In his *Autobiography*, he wrote "... as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours; and this we should do freely and generously." (Franklin, Franklin, & Duane, 1859, p. 47) We can certainly find out he

directed his invention with practical utility for human betterment.

In Franklin's life, he engaged in various public affairs and invented many pragmatic products, all these social affairs and scientific inventions revealed that Franklin's pragmatism with an orientation for human betterment by means of cooperative efforts.

4. The Heritage of Benjamin Franklin's Pragmatism Spirit

Though Franklin's pragmatism is not in philosophical sense, it lies in its pragmatic benefits as the evaluation standard, its experimental method to real life and its orientation for human betterment. Concerning Franklin's personality and the attitude towards life, Robert E. Spiller noted that Franklin was "[a] pragmatist long before William James defined the term," "we can only appreciate Franklin's pragmatism by discovering the same trait in other Americans and seeing it as a dominant strain throughout the long history of our intellectual development." (Campbell, 1999, p. 269) Franklin's life experience which expounds the pragmatic spirit could make contribution to change one's fate and realize his dream, and also the self-reliance spirit which reflects in the book has been developed by the 19th Transcendentalism writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, becoming a major thought in the 19th century of America.

The *Autobiography* presents us with a vivid remarkably sketch of a pragmatic, self-reliant, confident, industrial and rational individual who takes completely for granted the great value of both useful productivity and personal prosperity. J.A. Leo Lemay believed that "Franklin incorporates into the *Autobiography* the American dream: 'the rise from impotence to importance, from dependence to independence, from helplessness to power'." (Campbell, 1999, p. 25)

From the countless cultural references after his departure, we shall easily find out his popularity with the Americans. The Americans lived by this kind of pragmatic philosophy, they think highly of Benjamin Franklin, they do recognize the pragmatic spirit, and the values of the self-dependent, free, equal opportunities, pragmatic, and utility are turned into the standards to measure all the things. In other words, Americans are in favor of real action and its results rather than the abstract theory which is indifferent to the realizations of aims. Just as American scholar Henry Steele Commager's opinion, "...disturbed the American, and he avoided abstruse philosophies of government or conduct as healthy men avoid medicines." (Commager, 1961, p. 8)

America is a melting pot, the pragmatic spirit of Benjamin Franklin deeply influences modern American values and life style in its later 200 years. Americans adopt the pragmatic spirit of Benjamin Franklin and develop the pragmatic and forward-looking character, attaching emphasis on the pragmatic effects.

5. Conclusion

Benjamin Franklin's pragmatic spirits deeply influenced the American people, although Pragmatism as a philosophy emerged in the 19th century, but the pursuit of success of Benjamin Franklin in the *Autobiography* is actually in the guidance of this pragmatic spirit. The pragmatic benefits standard and experimental method are so apparent reflected in the inner moral cultivation, i.e., the famous 13 virtues he embraced and he translated them in daily practice, and the life engagements: emphasis on commercial success, engaging in both scientific experiments and political affairs. All these also exemplified its orientation for human betterment. The times of his age creates the great man, and sets up a new American image: attaching more significance to the action, laying emphasis on its effects, advocating pioneering spirit. These are the essential parts of American pragmatic philosophy.

The paper focuses on the exploration of pragmatism in the *Autobiography*, which analyzes its sources specifically ranging from his personal life experience and the general macro environments with up-surging capitalism and Puritanism, the Age of Enlightenment. Based on previous study on Benjamin Franklin, the author tries to dig out the deep resources and uncover the mystical veil of this great man. So that the author expects that reader could get a better understanding of pragmatic spirit of Benjamin Franklin. In the writing of this paper, the collection, arrangements and processing of material is very demanding. The *Autobiography* indeed gives us his life picture, but these materials are numerous and jumbled, the material about his pragmatic spirit are not systematic, because of limited time and ability, the paper might have some generalization and partial evaluation, which is not out of its original intention, so the in-depth inquiry of the sources is essential and yet to be explored.

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