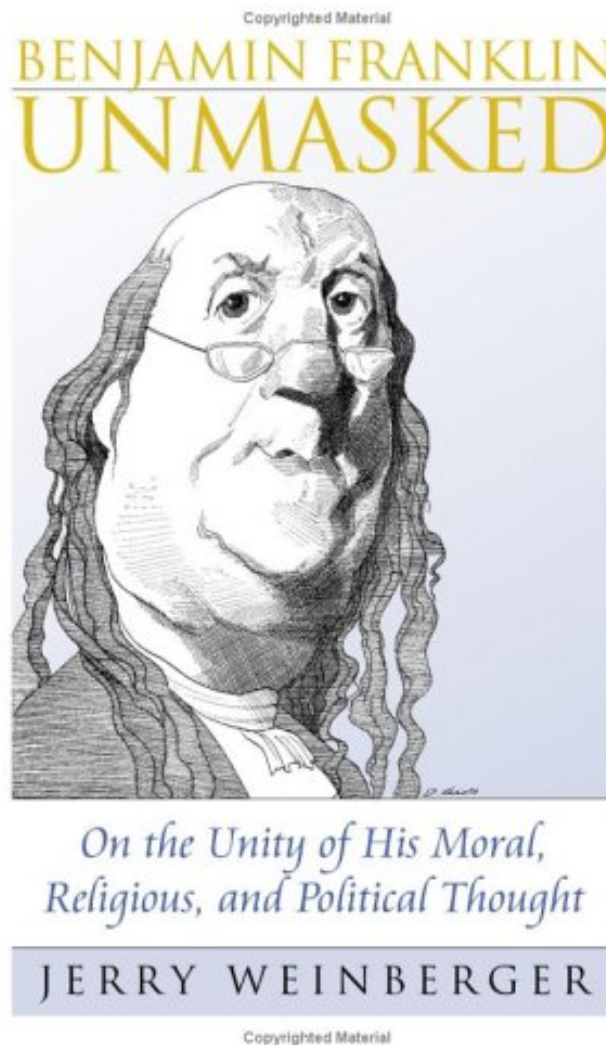


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## **Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought (American Political Thought (University Press of Kansas))**

*Jerry Weinberger*

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**Jerry Weinberger : Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought (American Political Thought (University Press of Kansas))** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought (American Political Thought (University Press of Kansas)):

14 of 16 people found the following review helpful. If Franklin were Greek, would he be a zetetic? By Shaun King.com I am interested in comparing the 5 best biographies of Benjamin Franklin that have been written (thus far) in the new millennia, emphasizing Weinberger's account. THE BEST 5 BIOGRAPHIES ARE (in order of publication date) Edmund S. Morgan's Benjamin Franklin (Yale Nota Bene S.) H. W. Brands's The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin Walter Isaacson's Benjamin Franklin: An American Life Gordon S. Wood's The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin Jerry Weinberger's Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought (American Political Thought) The first 4 of these biographies are presented as in the typical historically (and chronologically) biographical approach. There are 24 pictures in Morgan's book, no pictures in Brands's book, 32 pictures in Isaacson's book, 25 pictures in Wood's book, and no pictures in Weinberger's book. I am not going to write about how great Franklin was or what he did (he was great and he did so much). I want to write primarily about how each of these authors portrays Franklin's character differently by highlighting different aspects of his life. In London (1725) Franklin wrote "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain," which seemed to show that Franklin was a young radical Deist. In the pamphlet, he denied free will, denied the existence of vice and virtue and merit, and rejected particular providence. Later, when the pamphlet was reprinted in Boston, Franklin became a social outcast of sorts and he wrote that he was "inclined to leave Boston" because people were calling him "an infidel or atheist." When Franklin fled Boston he was 17 years old. He later wrote about that pamphlet that began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful. "Later, after becoming rich from his printing presses, writings, and scientific discoveries, Franklin became a statesman, diplomat, Founding Father, and icon. At the end of his life he wrote his "Autobiography," where Franklin said that he "never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity, that he made the world, and governed it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service to God was the doing of good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished and virtue rewarded either here or hereafter; these I esteemed the essentials of every religion." If you've read Leo Strauss's "Persecution and the Art of Writing" then you'll be familiar with Weinberger's hermeneutic. Weinberger sees a contradiction: Franklin seriously doubted as a young man what he says to have never doubted as an old man (compare the 1725 pamphlet to the aforementioned quote from the "Autobiography"). Weinberger notes, "...to my knowledge, this flat contradiction has remained unnoticed by everyone who has written..." on Franklin (pg. 49). According to Weinberger, Franklin's treatment in Boston and his belief that George Whitfield should not have written anything that would leave him open to attack, created a Franklin who wrote subtly for those who take the time to peel back the shades of meaning in his own texts. Indicators are contradictions and contradictions are dissolvable when we find something deeper which ties things together. Franklin is a "radical skeptic" according to Weinberger. The philosophical Franklin is hidden behind his humor (often debauched). Weinberger's Franklin is a true anomaly among the other historians. He attacks Isaacson's pragmatist-Franklin as "always look[ing] on the bright side of things because they are not really pragmatists" (pg. 289; my brackets). He attacks Wood in a 2 and page footnote, where Wood's presentation of an "angry Franklin" is (somehow) incompatible with Franklin's proposed skepticism (pg. 314-317). Weinberger says that as a philosopher Franklin could not have sustained anger as a part of his political motivations because the skeptical Franklin would be "able to reflect philosophically on the perfect irrationality of anger as the wellspring of moral and political commitments" (pg. 223, see also pg. 288). In fact, Brands might agree, he said that Franklin was a skeptic by temperament (Brands, pg. 94). However, Weinberger sees Franklin's skepticism as "even more radical and more thoughtfully grounded..." (pg. xiii). Because Franklin is supposedly a skeptic he could not agree with Spinoza and Hobbes who appear as dogmatic as the religious leaders (begin with materialist assumptions and end with their conclusions and visa versa for spiritualists...see pg. 75-59 and 277). However, Franklin does follow Hobbes insofar as Hobbes was the protg of Francis Bacon. Weinberger calls Franklin's politics "political Baconianism: the view that politics is an artful game aimed at getting things to work right and not a matter of setting things 'right' in the sense of justice" (pg. 234-235). Hobbes "outlined the most powerful version of political Baconianism" (pg. 235). Yet Franklin could not follow Hobbes all the way because Hobbes became a materialist-dogmatist and Franklin remained a skeptic. Franklin, in a sense, tried to take on Socratic Ignorance, Franklin was "first the careful, dialectical philosopher..." (pg. 290). The historians, on the other hand, who follow loosely Morgan's notion that "charity" was the "guiding principle of Franklin's life" (Morgan, pg. 24) continue along with Wood who says Franklin "came to realize that science and philosophy could never take the place of service in government" (Wood, pg. 66). One of Weinberger's best summaries of Franklin's quasi-political machinations may be that "for all his real efforts to foster his minimalist 'creed' that would not 'shock the professors of any religion,' he always included divine punishment in that creed and was quite willing both to shock believers and to side with enthusiasts, whichever prudence required. Franklin's concrete religious politics could be well described as inclined towards 'managed enthusiasm'" (pg. 279). 0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Ben Franklin By Ronald Teuber A well documented book about Ben and set the record straight on Ben and what he thought about the big issues. There is a lot of bad stuff out there about Franklin 11 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Outstanding Exploration of Franklin's Thought By Seth W Jerry Weinberger has truly revealed the real Franklin behind the masks. First, this book is truly hilarious... Franklin's scatological humor, his idea to create sweet-smelling flatulence, or his advice to bed older women who will be more grateful, makes

reading this also-serious work a laugh riot!!Second, Weinberger has taken Franklin more seriously than anyone else to date and lays bare the real intent behind his thought. The review by "Dave" here completely misses the point of the book. Franklin mocked everything and everyone, including himself, so one has to look beyond the words written to the true meaning, which is revealed by Weinberger to lie in numerous contradictions, confusing language and re-worded poems. For example, the "contradiction" that "Dave" fails to see is that Franklin at one point in his Autobiography mentions that he never stopped believing in god; something that completely contradicts an earlier claim by Franklin that he did indeed stop believing, only to return to religion later in life. As Weinberger mentions, is it believable or possible that a religious person could forget that he once did not believe, or forget the very moment at which he became a believer? Hardly. Weinberger's task is to unravel this mystery...and he does so masterfully.If you want to know Benjamin Franklin beyond what is presented in the biographies (and I have read those by Brands and Isaacson) to see the true depth and power of his thoughts, Weinberger's book is excellent!!!

Moral paragon, public servant, founding father; scoundrel, opportunist, womanizing phony: There are many Benjamin Franklins. Now, as we celebrate the tercentenary of Franklin's birth, Jerry Weinberger reveals the Franklin behind the many masks and shows that the real Franklin was far more remarkable than anyone has yet discovered.Taking the Autobiography as the key to Franklin's thought, Weinberger argues that previous assessments have not yet probed to the bottom of Ben's famous irony and elusiveness. While others take the self-portrait as an elder statesman's relaxed and playful retrospection, Weinberger unveils it as the window to Franklin's deepest reflections on God, virtue, justice, equality, natural rights, love, the good life, the modern technological project, and the place and limits of reason in politics and human experience. Along the way, Weinberger explores Franklin's ribald humor, usually ignored or toned down by historians and critics, and shows it to be charming-and philosophic.Following Franklin's rhetorical twists and turns, Weinberger discovers a serious thinker who was profoundly critical of religion, moral virtue, and political ideals and whose grasp of human folly constrained his hopes for enlightenment and political reform. This close and amusing reading of Franklin portrays a scrupulous dialectical philosopher, humane and wise, but more provocative and disturbing than even the most hardboiled interpreters have taken Franklin to be a freethinking critic of Enlightenment freethinking, who played his moral and theological cards very close to the vest.Written for general readers who want to delve more deeply into the mind of a great man and great American, Benjamin Franklin Unmasked shows us a massively powerful intellect lurking behind the leather-apron countenance. This lively, witty, and revelatory book is indispensable for those who want to meet the real Franklin.

Weinbergers book offers a revolutionary reevaluation of Franklins thought, one that unveils Franklin as a far more subtle, complex, and subversive thinker than most have cared to notice. This useful volume has the virtue of being an education in itself, and will pay rich dividends for those willing to learn from this charming American Socrates.Weekly Standard" Intricate, probing, and insightful. . . . Weinberger has an extraordinary talent for illuminating the meaning of texts." Perspectives on Politics "An elegant and fascinating companion to, and analysis of, the work of our cleverest Founding Father. At a time when some noisy advocates are attempting to revise American history, and to represent the Founders as men who believed in a Christian nation, this book could not be more welcome." Christopher Hitchens in the Atlantic Monthly "Weinberger explores the many identities assumed by Franklin. He deftly unveils his self-portrait to delve into the values and ideas of the powerful intellect lurking behind a multitude of masks. For Weinberg Franklins radical and philosophical humor is an important window to his deepest thoughts. . . . Weinbergers stimulating study provides a treasure trove of examples to support his views." Studies in American Humor "Weinberger argues that despite the seeming contradictions in Franklin's life and writings, he was ultimately true to himself and developed a unified, remarkable, and relevant philosophy of life. Weinberger also offers an in-depth look at Franklin's masterly use of humor, showing that it remains an important and often overlooked medium for his deepest thoughts. Well researched and well written, this intellectual biography is for both the scholar and the lay reader" Library Journal Ravishingly subversive. Andrew Sullivan An elegant and fascinating companion to, and analysis of, the work of our cleverest Founding Father. At a time when some noisy advocates are attempting to revise American history, and to represent the Founders as men who believed in a Christian nation, this book could not be more welcome. Christopher Hitchens in the Atlantic Monthly Franklins many masks are examined and lifted to disclose the one real man behind them. Weinberger gives us the radical truth about Franklin in a book that is a delight to read. Harvey Mansfield, author of Americas Constitutional Soul With the focus of a bloodhound and the tenacity of a bulldog Weinberger follows Bens spoofs and sophisms into whatever cul-de-sac they lead. His Franklin is a coherent philosopher-skeptic who teases us into thinking for ourselves. . . . A bracing, hilarious, and enlightening experience. Ralph Lerner, author of The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic A lively, clever and well-informed account thats sure to raise controversy. Ralph Ketcham, author of The Political Thought of Ben Franklin From the Back Cover "Franklin's many masks are examined and lifted to disclose the one real man--a thinker--behind them. Weinberger gives us the radical truth about Franklin in a book that is a delight to read." --Harvey Mansfield, author of America's Constitutional Soul "With the focus of a bloodhound and the tenacity of a bulldog

Weinberger follows Ben's spoofs and sophisms into whatever cul-de-sac they lead. His Franklin is a coherent philosopher-skeptic who teases us into thinking for ourselves. . . . A bracing, hilarious, and enlightening experience."--Ralph Lerner, author of *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic* "A lively, clever and well-informed account that's sure to raise controversy."--Ralph Ketcham, author of *The Political Thought of Ben Franklin*

About the Author Jerry Weinberger is professor of political science at Michigan State University, where he is director of the LeFrak Forum and co-director of the Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy. He is also the author of *Science, Faith, and Politics: Francis Bacon and the Utopian Roots of the Modern Age* and *Francis Bacon: The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh - A New Edition with Introduction, Annotation, and Interpretive Essay*.