The Good Life at a Great Price. Guaranteed.

Department store Sears claims to have the key to it. Benjamin Franklin declares that if one behaves like him, one will have it. Socrates states that if one follows his example and the advice of a divine priestess, one can obtain it. It would seem an easy thing to obtain if a department store can readily offer it to you for “a great price,” but few people truly have what all these sources claim to offer readily—“the good life.” If most people did have “the good life,” Benjamin Franklin would have no advice to offer in his autobiography, nor would Socrates have had anything to say in the Symposium. Franklin and Socrates, in slightly varying ways, offer their readers an opportunity to seize “the good life.” Franklin’s method consists of an adherence to a self-designed set of thirteen principals that brings about a comfortable lifestyle, whereas Socrates’ method consists of a thirst for wisdom and beauty which comes to fruition in the reproduction of this wisdom and beauty.

In Franklin’s method, his list of thirteen virtues clearly portrays a specific design for obtaining “the good life.” Among these thirteen, Franklin lists the values of temperance. He defines the maintaining of temperance as “Eat not to Dulness. Drink not to Elevation (sic)” (“Autobiography”, 149). In Franklin’s autobiography, he proves his faithfulness to this tenet while working at Watt’s Printing House and abstaining from
drink in spite of his coworkers, who were “great Guzzlers of Beer” (99). By not drinking, Franklin claims to be “stronger than themselves who drank strong Beer (sic),” thus said being more productive, efficient, and valuable (“Autobiography” 100). In this way, Franklin’s value of temperance ties in with his value of industry. Franklin says in order to be industrious one must “Lose no Time. Be always employ’d in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary Actions (sic)” (“Autobiography” 149). He tries to follow through with this plan by drawing out a schedule of his day that leaves no time wasted. This also plays on Franklin’s virtues of frugality and order, in which Franklin encourages his readers to “waste nothing” and to “let each Part of your Business have its Time (sic)” (“Autobiography” 149). These values in particular display Franklin’s desire for efficient work, resulting in less energy spent and more money generated.

Through a system of obtaining these aforementioned virtues and Franklin’s use of this system on himself, he is encouraging the reader to be like him. He intentionally chose to include in his autobiography a letter written by his friend Benjamin Vaughn which urges Franklin to “invite all wise men to become like yourself; and other men to become wise” (136). Clearly Franklin believes that his set of virtues and his system for making these virtues habitual is the way to “the good life.”

“The good life” that Franklin portrays is one of comfortable condition and intellectual growth. This comfortable condition represents a middle-class life where one has enough money due to the virtues of frugality, order, temperance, industry, and the like. Intellectual growth refers to a hunger for wisdom and knowledge that Franklin, as a scientist, claims to have. Since Franklin has these things and believe that everyone else wishes to have them, all should emulate him in order to obtain “the good life.”
In Socrates’ method, the constant craving of beauty and love leads to the good life. In the Symposium, Plato uses a series of speeches about Love by rather clueless guests at a party to contrast with the more intelligent speech of Socrates. However, Socrates does not claim the speech as his own, but declares it was a speech he learned from a priestess named Diotima, “a woman who was wise about many things” (Plato 45). Her status as a priestess, her wisdom, and her name, which translates to “God blessed,” give this speech a divine aspect and provides it with a higher authority than any of the previous speeches. Diotima, through Socrates, says that Love itself is neither wise nor ignorant and neither beautiful or ugly, but somewhere in between each as it is always chasing after wisdom and beautiful things. This description of Love as seeking wisdom and loving wisdom relates directly to Socrates, as Socrates is considered a philosopher, a word which comes from the Greek philosophia, or lover of wisdom. Also, as Paul Shorey states, “In the Symposium love is not a god, but a demon” or in Greek daimonion (11). A form of daimonion, daimonios, is later used in the Symposium by Alcibiades to describe Socrates. Consequently, Socrates is seen as the most like Love of any mortal, and, having this likeness, he is the most desirable for one to imitate.

According to Socrates through Diotima’s speech, “the good life” consists of one “giving birth in beauty,” or creating beautiful ideas and wisdom due to one’s ascension from simply craving beautiful things to loving Beauty itself (53). When one has ascended to loving Beauty, then one will therefore desire to have Beauty forever. In order to have this Beauty forever, one must perpetuate Beauty by this process of “giving birth in beauty.” Shorey describes this process as an instinct in each human to perpetuate oneself and to make oneself immortal (11). Diotima echoes this idea, claiming that
reproduction “is an immortal thing for a mortal animal to do” (Plato 53). This, Socrates claims, is the highest goal in life and therefore the thing for which all must strive—“the good life,” the fulfilling existence all mankind desires.

Clearly there are similarities and differences in the methods employed by Benjamin Franklin and Socrates to obtain “the good life.” Benjamin Franklin’s “Thirst for Knowledge” is roughly equivalent to Socrates’ philosophia (“Autobiography” 58). Both believe that seeking knowledge and wisdom is a worthy goal resulting in fulfillment or “the good life.” However, the comfortable condition Franklin sees as necessary is nowhere outlined in Socrates’ speeches. Socrates does not discuss a need for money or any other material item. Accordingly, Socrates’ theory is seen as much more nebulous and spiritual than Franklin’s, which focuses more on physical than social needs. However, Franklin adds a tiny spiritual element to his theory as almost an afterthought, placing a final virtue of humility on his list and defining it as “Imitate Jesus and Socrates” (“Autobiography” 150). Although this makes reference to the deeper spiritual issues dealt with by Socrates in Plato’s Symposium, Franklin reduces Socrates’ entire lifestyle and way to “the good life” into a single point. Imitating Socrates, according to Franklin, is consequently not the complete way to attain contentment in life. Franklin adds twelve of his own virtues to Socrates’ way to fulfillment as outlined by the godlike Diotima.

Socrates’ adherence to the values given by the wise and almost divine Diotima elevates him to such a level that Paul W. Gooch believes “Plato’s Socrates is less human than the Jesus of the Gospels” (272). This perception is probably based on Socrates’ given state as a daimonios, which is a spirit that exists between mortal and immortal,
because Jesus Christ was believed to be both mortal and immortal, fully man and fully God at once. Franklin’s character is not given any such divine or exalted status.

Furthermore, where Socrates insists that the highest level of satisfaction stems from the perpetuation of beauty and wisdom, Franklin makes no such claim. In Franklin’s terms, it appears that wisdom only exists to benefit its current holder. In some of his famous Poor Richard sayings, Franklin mainly extols the virtue of being comfortably wealthy. For example, Franklin as Poor Richard claims that “a light purse is a heavy curse” (“Wit and Wisdom”). Although Franklin’s theory encompasses more of the everyday actions one must take toward fulfillment, most of what Franklin teaches is unnecessary in light of Socrates’ words in Plato’s Symposium. For example, if one seeks wisdom wholeheartedly, one will automatically make an attempt to fulfill Franklin’s virtues because the virtues Franklin suggests are wise and good themselves. Similarly, if one seeks beauty and “gives birth in beauty,” one will instinctively do the things Franklin believed were righteous and pass good things on to future generations (Plato 53).

Socrates is concerned with the immortal and the perpetuation of beauty, but Franklin is concerned only with the temporal and the perpetuation of financial security. This discrepancy in values leads me to believe that Franklin’s teachings are superfluous and shallow.

Therefore, Socrates’ simplistic but all-encompassing message is comparable to Jesus’ condensing the numerous and often nonessential commandment of the Jewish Torah into two simple commands, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (The Student Bible Mark 12:30-31). When one adheres to these basic
commands, the rest of the law falls into place in much the same way that following Socrates’ example allows Franklin’s virtues to fall into place. Socrates, then, is the true model for “the good life.” He understands that true fulfillment only comes from the desire for beauty and wisdom, not from a desire for Franklin’s comfortable life or Sears’ Kenmore dishwashers.

Comment: Sounds like your analysis of who is right is founded on what the Bible says— if that is true, please bring the fact that the Bible is your standard into the rest of your paper.

Comment: Good, firm summation of what you discussed in the paper. How does this tie in to your title?

Comment: Closing Thoughts: Your thesis when fully developed is more complex than its initial statement—but what a great thesis to wind up with! You’re really arguing that the Socratic way to the good life is superior to Franklin’s because all the virtues Franklin recommends are implicit in it and, in addition, it looks to immortal goods, right? This argument is subtle, observant, and provocative—nice going.

Now—you’d have a clearer argument if you began with this thesis, and related all of what you include in the paper to it. As it stands, you’re working through what you understand, working your way towards a thesis; readers don’t always know where you’re headed, and we sometimes feel like the road you’re taking us is a bit overgrown and hard to see. That’s how the daimonion materials feel—they might actually fit into your thinking better than I realize, but I need clearer explanation to perceive what you do.

Suggestion: You might go through your paper, bearing in mind what your thesis is and making a brief outline of what your main points are. Then you can reorganize them and trim your intro and conclusion to make them clearer—which will make your insights shine!