Virtuous Franklin

Throughout history there have been many influential people of virtue and reason. Two people that are thought of as influential men of reason are Socrates and Benjamin Franklin. Both of these men lived in very different eras and had very different lifestyles. However, they both knew how to lead good lives. Though, it was Ben Franklin who lead and taught how to lead a virtuous life because he understood he world around him and it turn helped him become a better person.

Ben Franklin was a man who was first to live out the American Dream: the idea that one person can rise up in social class, become wealthy, and become scholarly. He was a self-motivated man who appreciated the art of learning, which was most important to him. But he, unlike many of his peers, was self taught. His leanings would bring him honorary degrees from both Harvard and Yale (Franklin 209). He felt that attending school didn’t do much more than show people how to behave socially. He would alter go on to say that “because they think their purses can afford it will needs send them to the Temple of Learning, where, for want of a suitable genius, they learn little more than how to carry themselves handsomely and enter a room genteely,” (Van Doren 23). Because of his background he was able to participate in many different events that others could not. One example being that he was able to comfortably retire from his printing press earlier
than most could have and direct his attention towards his scientific experiments and bettering the world around him. It was through science where Franklin would find the answers he needed.

Socrates, who is the ultimate philosopher, would argue that the best way to learn is by asking questions. He asks us “how can we ever learn what we do not already know?” (www.philosophypages.com). Socrates would sit you down and ask “Why? Why?” until you understood what it is you are trying to do or, at least, appear that you understand. Socrates goes on to say that “either we already know what we are looking for, in which case we don’t need to look, or we don’t know what we are looking for, in which case we wouldn’t recognize it if we found it,” (www.philosophypages.com). This raises another question. How are we supposed to know what we are looking for? He means that we are born with a basic understanding of the world around us and that we simply just need to think about something for awhile and it will come to us. The only escape, according to Socrates, is to acknowledge that we already know what we need to know. This is not the correct way to be taught something that you do not know. What needs to happen is that you need to learn about what it is you do not know. Meaning, that you need to be able to apply what you are learning. Franklin would say that the best way to learn something new is to learn a little about the subject and by simply going out and trying it. Even if what you did was the wrong approach, you will know that was not he correct way to do it, and you will try again.

Franklin understands that knowledge will not simply come in the middle of the night. We need to work at gaining knowledge and wisdom, both of which come from any type of experience. Through experience we learn what it means to live a good life.
Early in his life, Franklin felt that he needed to do some good in his life and help those around him. Some of his accomplishments include: a fire station, the stove and a poor hospital. Every morning he would wake up from his slumber and ask himself the same question, “What Good shall I do this Day?” (Franklin 154). In the evening he would ask himself, “What Good Have I done today?” (154). More often than not, he would have done some good in his or someone else’s life. Socrates would also help people, but he would do so by making them answer their own questions. Granted that Socrates lived 2400-plus years ago in a society based on tradition, still he would make anyone come to him, whereas Franklin would seek out people in need to help them. Tradition influences both Socrates and Franklin. Socrates lived in a time and place where it was looked down upon to disagree with the state, and to stray too far from what was viewed as normal. He was put to death for having an opinion. Franklin lived in a different era. He lived in a time of change, where his views shaped a nation. He broke free from the traditions of England and did what he needed to do to better himself. One of these things was serving his country in the military.

Both Franklin and Socrates served in their respective militaries. Both men fought bravely. One account tells us that Socrates risked his life to save Laches and Alcibiades who would later recall, “He just refused to leave me behind when I was wounded, and he rescued not only me but my armor as well,” (Plato, 73). Franklin, too, served his country in the French-Indian War as a Colonial, but his rank was later stripped from him by the British military (Franklin 231). The question now is does serving the military make one virtuous? Does physical strength and bravery make one a virtuous person? The answer is no. Look at leaders throughout history.
Alexander the Great, Stalin, Mao. All of who were strong leaders who were looked to by their people, but none of these men were virtuous. None of these men were willing to put someone above themselves. They alone were correct in their opinion and did not understand humility. Franklin shows true humility when his brother dies. What he did was very characteristic of himself, he sent his sister-in-law 500 copies of Poor Richard’s Almanac so that she could make money selling them. It wasn’t only that she would be making money from these books, she would be actively involved within her community. She would be making a living for herself, something very rare in the 1700s (www.ushistory.org).

Virtue comes when the only thing that one strives for is good. Franklin made a list of thirteen virtues. He would practice one of these virtues a week until he became perfect. After a few weeks he realized that no one can ever become perfect. This did not stop him from living a virtuous life however. He took it upon himself to become the best that was possible. Everyday he would try and do good in his life and help those in need. Socrates, although doing good, tried to help those he could, but asking questions can only go so far in times of crisis. Action is far more important. It is by action that things can get done.

True, absolute virtue cannot be attained. For it to be absolute virtue it must come from something that is perfect and nothing can be truly perfect. Ben Franklin realized this, but he did the best that he could. His accomplishments speak for themselves. Plato, Socrates top student, like Ben Franklin “wanted to discover the ultimate constituents of reality and the grounds for and knowledge of them,” (philosophypages.com). The “grounds for and knowledge of them: would be science and education. Franklin knew that in order to live a virtuous life he needed to know what the world was all about and it

Comment: Is humility your understanding of virtue?

Comment: This section seems like a new topic beginning, since Franklin’s humility seems a different idea than the one that F and S both fought bravely. Could you spell out a bit more directly how this action of F’s exemplifies humility? It seems kind and generous, and probably especially thoughtful—but how is it humble? (It might well be an instance of humility—I just need your guidance to help me see what you do.)

Comment: Be more specific about your point in your topic sentence. Generalizations or blanket statements like this need to be connected to concrete information, if they’re to be effective guides for the reader.

Comment: Another nonspecific topic sentence—as a reader, I want to know where you land in regards to BF vs. S, not your general philosophical view about virtue.

Comment: GOOD.
was through science and education that this was attained. He needed to know these things in order to understand how the world worked, and once that is understood, it is easier to see how virtue is attained. To make this happen, he knew that education was key.

Comparing Benjamin Franklin and the philosopher Socrates is like comparing apples and oranges. However, they were both men of great knowledge. They both understood that it is through wisdom and more importantly, virtue is the correct way to lead a life. Ben Franklin understood how to live virtuously. Socrates did not. Socrates knew that virtue was important but he could never reach it, he only understood his own opinion and why it was correct. His opinion on love being that everyone loves something because it is good (Plato 52) is skewed. He believes that what everyone loves is really nothing other than the good. This is wrong. There are many people what love o do what they know is wrong. St. Augustine for example, knew that stealing pears and giving hem to the pigs was wrong (St. Augustine 29) but that is the reason he sis that action. Franklin would try greatly to do some form of good every day. It was the first thing that he though about in the morning and one of the last things he would think about at night. Socrates would try to help people, but all he would do would be to convince people why they should do something a certain way. Franklin knew how to lead his life virtuously, Socrates did not.