“All good moral philosophy is but an handmade to religion” Francis Bacon 1561-1626

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“To believe only possibilities, is not faith, but mere philosophy.”
Sir Thomas Browne 1605-1682

Dear Masonic Student,

We have an excellent Masonic paper for this first issue of T.F.S. in 2009. It is written by Worshipful Brother Roger Firestone. I know you will enjoy reading this paper and will want to read it again and again from time to time, it’s that good. This paper was first published in the October 2008 issue of ‘The Virginia Masonic Herald.’ Brother Roger is a member of the Minnesota Grand Lodge Education Committee, and I’m thankful he sent this paper so we could publish it again here. - Ed

Masonic Philosophy
By Roger M. Firestone, PM

Originally, as it began in antiquity and continued into early modern times, the term "philosophy" covered all forms of knowledge outside medicine, law, and theology. Somewhat later, it tended to exclude history, literature, and the arts, but still provided a guide to the interpretation of those fields it did not propose to include immediately. Even physics, chemistry, astronomy, and the other sciences, such as they were, were lumped together as "natural philosophy" and taught in departments of that name at universities in the US and other countries well into the 19th century.

Around the beginning of the 20th century, with the increase in general knowledge, the development of specialization in many areas of both the arts and sciences, and the expansion of institutionalized learning, the definition and teaching of philosophy became more restricted in scope. As we understand the term today, philosophy comprises logic, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. Moreover, it connotes a method of arriving at new knowledge by speculative means (thinking), rather than empirical methods (observation and experimentation).

Masonic thought, as we see it explicitly in the degrees, notably that of the Fellow Craft, where useful knowledge is particularly emphasized, contains only one discipline usually thought of now as philosophy: Logic. Astronomy is one of those areas considered as natural philosophy, while mathematics (which begins with arithmetic and geometry) is considered as dependent on, but distinct from logic. Masonic philosophy is to be found in the interpretation of the degrees as well as from the nature of the institution itself, as it evolved in modern times.

We date the modern institution of Freemasonry from the formation of the first Grand Lodge on St. John's Day, 1717, although Lodges engaged in speculative Freemasonry for more than a century prior to that date, based on what sparse records survive. By that year, the start of the Renaissance was some two centuries past, and many areas of learning were far more available than in mediaeval times, when only clergy and nobility had access even to such basic skills as reading and writing.

In 1717, the Protestant Reformation was exactly two hundred years old (in October), yet many of its issues still had to be resolved. Queen Anne, last of the Stuart line to hold the throne, had died in 1714; a Jacobite uprising ("the Fifteen") followed the year after that. But the House of Orange had ratified the Declaration of Right not thirty years before, when the Stuart king, James II, was deposed, and its principles were not to be reversed. Thought and education in England, having become part of the United Kingdom less than a decade earlier, was changing dramatically, paralleling the movement on the continent of Europe known as the Enlightenment.
With very limited records of Freemasonry prior to 1717, we can only hypothesize about what constituted discussions in Masonic Lodges of the early era. We have some idea, thanks to Elias Ashmole’s diary, of the kind of man who became an accepted Mason in the 17th century: a gentleman, meaning one who did not work with his hands or in a shopkeeping enterprise, but who owned property (real estate, e.g.) and lived off the income from it, not necessarily a member of the nobility, possibly a clergyman or military officer. Such men had the leisure time for study of history and literature, which largely meant the classics of the Greco-Roman period, along with that of England (e.g., Chaucer, Shakespeare, Malory, and the like). The Greek and Latin classics would include much of foundational philosophy, like the works of Aristotle, the Socratic dialogues recorded by Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and others. These classics were the foundation of Western university education until well into the 19th century.

These, then, are the ingredients poured into the mix that was Freemasonry in its first few years of the modern Grand Lodge period: Classical Greek and Roman philosophy, the still-maturing religious Reformation of Christianity, the recent Declaration of Right, knowledge of the Enlightenment on the Continent, a lengthy literary tradition in English (including the chivalric romances), an English tradition of individual rights beginning half a millennium earlier with the Magna Carta, and political ferment between the monarch and Parliament (as well as change in the House from which the monarch was chosen). To all of that can be added certain ideas peculiar to Freemasonry and derived from the supposed connection between its structure in modern times and the mediaeval operative guilds, which were the notions of labor and building as honorable (in a time when, as noted already, gentlemen did not, for the most part, actually engage in work) and the need for liberty as a prerequisite for contributing most effectively to the advance of the human race.

What resulted was a philosophy that differed from what had been a discipline of intellectual contemplation in ancient times, and, in mediaeval times, something pursued mostly by monastics. For one thing, Freemasonry's philosophy takes as axiomatic certain issues that have been the subject of considerable debate among philosophers from ancient times. Three of these are: Is there a God? Is there life after death? Is there a moral law? No Mason needs instruction on where to find the answer to these questions in our ritual. Further, certain topics are ruled out of Masonic discussions to the extent that they derive from sectarian religion; for example, the nature of life after death is not treated by Masonic ritual, because conflicts among Christian or Jewish resurrection, Muslim paradise, and Hindu or Buddhist reincarnation, not to mention other possibilities considered by individual Masons, cannot be resolved in amity among Brothers.

Remembering that the modern concept of philosophy, as it began to develop in the 18th century, comprised logic, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology, not all of these would be accessible to most of the men who became Masons, as the fraternity grew explosively then. As just noted, most of the metaphysical questions are either considered settled in the Masonic context or else out of bounds. Logic, which is taught in the FC degree, is not like the other fields, in that it is a tool for thinking clearly, but does not tell us what to think about. Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is a difficult subject not likely to be easily explored by the average Mason of any period, including the 1700s.

This leaves aesthetics and ethics. These two have something in common: Both concern evaluation of what is good, the former in the sense of what is good in terms of perception, and the latter in terms of action.

The term "aesthetics" is not mentioned explicitly in the ritual, yet we find several references to the concept of beauty, associated with the Corinthian architectural order, the role of GMHA in creating the decorations of the temple, the beautiful Indented Tessel, and so on. Rituals of the 2nd degree in other states note that the Creator provided senses like smelling and tasting in such a way that the organ of smell can warn us before we ingest and taste something nauseous; another aspect of aesthetics—teaching us to use all our senses to appreciate the beauty of the world, both natural and man-made.

What most Masons think of when asked to describe Masonic philosophy is what remains: Ethics. Masonry has been described as “practical moral philosophy,” treating ethics not as solely some abstract consideration of an ideal world, but requiring the Mason to put ethics to use in his daily life. A very large part of the ethics found in the Masonic degrees is little different from what developed in the West from the classical Greco-Roman philosophers, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, their interpretations, and the works of their mediaeval students from Aquinas and Augustine onward. The four cardinal virtues
taught in the EA degree are neither unique nor novel to Freemasonry, nor are the directives of charity, brotherly love, or fidelity to a trust. How the elements of these ideas became foundations of political philosophy in the Scottish Rite Degrees must be left for another time, however. The charge in installing a Master to be "a good man and true, and strictly to obey the moral law" applies to us all, and embraces practical ethics in a single sentence.

The one unique and profound element of 18th century Masonic ethics is the notion of religious toleration. The Reformation had not embraced any such idea: Martin Luther penned numerous anti-Semitic tracts, and in Britain, the established Church had little tolerance for Dissenters. Quakers and Methodists, for example, labored under restrictions nearly as stringent as those on Jews. Yet we read in the Old Charges of obligating the Brethren only to "that religion on which all men agree." Not to mention that, while atheists or agnostics might not be admitted to the Lodge, there was no brief in Masonry to persecute them either. This was a dramatic departure from all of preceding history and one of the greatest contributions Masonry made to human progress by spreading this philosophical doctrine.

The struggle continues today, even within Masonry, as some Brothers fail to understand this vital part of Masonic philosophy and live up to what is made clear in the degrees, as well as in Scripture: "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." To use a difference of opinion in how the Creator is to be worshipped as justification for hatred and bloodlust is a most grievous offense against Him and the worst form of blasphemy. What could be simpler to understand than a philosophy of "Do good unto all; recommend it more especially to the household of the faithful." Such a Masonic philosophy is within the reach of every Brother.

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“Histories make men wise; poets, witty; the mathematics, subtle; natural philosophy, deep; moral, grave; logic and rhetoric, able to contend.” Francis Bacon

From the Great Light of Masonry: “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the Philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 1 Corinthians 1:20 NIV

Words to live by: The hardest part of a job is getting started.

Please remember: if you would like to participate in the latest Masonic Monday Question, please go to http://www.lodgebuilder.org and click on the Lodge Education forum. When you have an answer send it to masonicmonday@gmail.com the Masonic Monday Question for the week of 12/29/08 is: “When was Twin Peaks Lodge # 32 in Midvale Utah founded and how does the Masonic Consecration Prayer, express and radiate tolerance and fraternity in Freemasonry?”

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“Philosophy! The lumber of the schools.” Jonathan Swift 1667-1745

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With “Brotherly Love”,
Ed Halpaus
Grand Lodge Education Officer

Seek to mentor a Brother Mason:
It's good for him, it's good for you, and it's good for Freemasonry!