

The Teachings of Freemasonry

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PART I INTRODUCTION

WHAT is this all about? This is a question I asked myself many times during my initiation experiences. It is a question, brother, which you doubtless asked yourself, and so has every other man who has forged on to the end of the Third degree. The language of the ritual, stately and beautiful as it usually is, is to most of us a mystifying speech; and the stations and stages of the dramatic actions are equally bewildering to the novice. Therefore is it that we ask the question, "What is it all about?"

After we have become familiarized with the ritual, and have learned something of its drift and its meaning, we discover that the Fraternity itself, as a whole, and apart from any mystery in any one part or detail, is something almost too complex to grasp. A member grows so accustomed to the goings on of his home lodge, that he loses his first sense of strangeness, but even so he hears ever and anon such things of the antiquity, the universality, and the profundity of Freemasonry as it exists in history and in the great world, as to make him feel that for all his familiarity with one Masonic lodge he is very much in the dark about the Masonic Fraternity in its entirety.

What is Freemasonry? What is it trying to do? How did it come to be? What are its central and permanent teachings? It is to answer these questions - and they are such questions as visit the mind of almost every Mason, however indifferent he may be - that the philosophy of Masonry exists. To learn "what it is all about," in the whole more especially than in the part, it is for this that we philosophize about our mysteries.

"How would you answer the newly-initiated brother who asks the question, "What is this all about?" Did you ask yourself that ques-

tion? How did you answer it? What advantage is there in trying to learn what Freemasonry means in the largest sense? What is meant by "the philosophy of Masonry"?

Why do we philosophize about it? How many reasons can you give for the necessity of philosophizing about it? Have you ever read a book explaining Freemasonry?"

The individual who secures membership in a Masonic lodge becomes thereby the heir to a rich tradition; that to which initiation gives him access is not something put together in a day, and it will profit him little if he makes no attempt to enter into his patrimony. He must learn something of the history of Masonry; of its achievements in the great nations; of its outstanding teachers, and what they have taught, of its ideas, principles, spirit. Initiation alone does not confer this knowledge (and could not): the man must himself strive to make his own the inexhaustible riches of the Order. He must be taught the larger purposes of the Fraternity to which he belongs.

There is no authorized interpretation of Freemasonry. The newly initiated brother does not find waiting for him a ready-made Masonic creed, or a ready-made explanation of the ritual - he must think Masonry out for himself. But to think Masonry out for one's self is no easy task. It requires that one can see it in its own large perspectives; that one knows the main outlines of its history; that one knows it as it actually is, and what it is doing; and that one knows it as it has been understood by its own authentic interpreters and prophets. It is not easy to do this without guidance and help, and it is to give this guidance and help that such studies exist as this new series on which we are now embarking.

"What is the reason for the study of the teachings of Freemasonry? How much of Freemasonry can a man learn from initiation? How else can he learn? What would you give as "the larger purposes of the Fraternity"?

"Why should one try to think Masonry out? Could you, unaided by books or another person, write an intelligent and intelligible answer to the question, "What is the meaning of Masonry?" -

There is still another reason for a study of philosophy, or as we here more familiarly describe it the teachings of Masonry. Our Fraternity is a world-wide organization with Grand Lodges in every State and practically every, Nation. In this country alone it is a vast affair of millions of members and many separate and independent Grand Lodges. To sustain and manage and foster such a society costs the world untold sums of money and human effort. How can Masonry justify its existence? What does it do to repay the world for its own cost? In one form or another these questions are asked of almost every member, and every member should be ready to give a true and adequate answer. But to give such an answer requires that he shall have grasped the large principles and be familiar with the outlines of the achievements of the Craft, and this again is one of the purposes of our philosophizing on Masonry.

How can we arrive at a philosophy of Masonry? How are we to learn the authentic interpretation of the teachings of Masonry? What is the method of procedure whereby one who is neither a general scholar nor a Masonic specialist may gain some such comprehensive understanding of Masonry as has been called for in the preceding paragraphs? In short, how may a man "get at it?"

One way to "get at it" is to read one or two good Masonic histories. There is no need to go into detail or to read up on the various side issues of merely antiquarian interest; that is for the professional student. There is only need to get the general drift of the story and to catch the outstanding events. To learn what Masonry has actually accomplished in the world is to gain an insight into its purposes and principles, for, like every other organization, it has revealed its spirit through its actions. From a knowledge of what the Order has been and what it has done in the past one can easily comprehend its own present nature and principles, for Masonry has never had a need to break with its own past! The Masonry of today does not make war on the Masonry of yesterday. Its character emerges clearly from its own history as a mountain stands out above a fog; and what it has ever been - at least in a large way - it is now, and doubtless always will be.

This same history forges ceaselessly on evermore renewing and making itself. It is going on today and the process is one that keeps

publishing itself to the seeing eye, for, after all, there is not much that is secret about the rich and tireless life of the Fraternity: indeed, this life is constantly revealing itself everywhere. Grand Lodges publish their Proceedings; men engaged in the active duties of Masonic offices make reports of their functionings; students of the Craft write articles and publish books; Masonic orators deliver countless speeches; special Masonic conferences, whatever be their nature, make known their business; most of the more important events get into the daily papers; there are scores and scores of Masonic papers, bulletins and journals, weekly, monthly and bi-monthly, and there are many libraries, study clubs and learned societies everywhere endeavoring with tireless zeal to make clear to members and profane "what it is all about." So it turns out that to learn this for one's self one does not need to take any one man's word for it; he can look about, and listen, and read up a little, and thereby form his own conclusions. It is amazing, when one looks into it how much of the labor going on in the Craft is designed to make clear, and to propagate and enforce the principles and teachings and spirit of our great Order. To learn what are these teachings asks of us no rare talents, no "inside knowledge," but only a little effort, a little time.

What would be your estimate of the monetary cost of Freemasonry to the United States? to the world? How many Masons are there in the United States? in the world? How many lodges are there in the United States? What does Masonry give in return for its cost?

How many Masonic histories can you name? Whose is generally considered the best? What advantage does a Mason derive from reading such a history? Would a knowledge of Freemasonry's own past be of any help to a lodge worker in present day affairs and problems? What is the character of Freemasonry as it "emerges from its own history"? What is there secret about the Order? If a man were to ask, How can I find out what is going on in American Freemasonry? how would you answer him? Can you name half a dozen Masonic periodicals? Have you ever read the Proceedings of your own Grand Lodge? How many can you name of the "few great ideas" about which Masonry constantly revolves? What is the difference between an "idea" and an "ideal"? How can a member learn what are these "great ideas"?

Where and how are they taught? Did your initiation cause you to think about life differently?

To the novice the Masonic world seems very confusing, it is so many-sided, so far-flung, so clamorous with voices and the din of action; but this, after all, need not frighten us away from an attempt to grasp that world with a comprehensive understanding, for all of Masonry constantly revolves about a few great ideas. These ideas confront one at every turn - what becomes more familiar to an active Mason than such words as "Brotherhood," "Equality," "Toleration," etc., etc. - so that the youngest Entered Apprentice need have no difficulty in getting at them. If he does get at them, and if he learns to understand them as Masons understand them, they will help him greatly to gain that comprehensive and inclusive understanding which we have been calling the philosophy of Masonry.

Nothing has been said as yet of the great teachers of Freemasonry.

In the older days there were Anderson, Oliver, Preston, Hutchinson, etc.; then came the philosophers of the middle years, Pike, Krause, Mackey, Drummond, Parvin, Gould; Speth, and others, and in our own day Waite, Pound, Newton, etc, etc. In the writings of these men the great and simple ideas of Freemasonry become luminous and intelligible, so that he who runs may read.

In addition to all this the member may take advantage of those interpretative devices which are a part of the Craft itself, the lectures and monitorial explanations built into the ritual of all the rites and degrees. None of these are infallible - nor are any of them made compulsory to believe but even when they stray farthest from the original meaning of our symbols they are always valuable in reviewing the ideas and ideals of multitudes who have originated or used them.

Thus much to show why we should strive to make for our own mind a philosophy of Masonry, and in how many ways one may arrive at that philosophy. There remains only one word in caution. A study of the philosophy of Masonry is not a study of Philosophy; the Masonic student as such may have little interest in Plato and Aristotle, in Neo-Platonism, Mysticism, Scholasticism, Rationalism, Idealism,

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Pragmatism, Naturalism, etc. Masonry touches upon the circumference of each of these and the other major philosophical systems, no doubt, but there is no such thing as a Masonic philosophy any more than there is such a thing as a Masonic religion. We speak of a philosophy of Masonry in the sense that we speak of a philosophy of government, or industry, or art, or science. We mean that one studies Masonry in the same large, informed inclusive and critical way in which a political economist studies government or an astronomer studies the stars. It would be a blessed thing if more of our members were to lift up their eyes from the immediate and often petty affairs of their own lodge room in order to gaze more often on those profound and wise principles which are to our Fraternity what the laws of nature are the universe.

Can you name a great Masonic teacher not mentioned in section? Whom do you consider the greatest interpreter of Masonry? Can you tell the differences between the groups mentioned? What is idea at the bottom of present-day Masonic thinking? In way does the ritual explain itself? What is a "philosophy"? What does the word mean? What means the phrase, "A Philosophy of Freemasonry"?

PART II

THE MASONIC CONCEPTION OF HUMAN NATURE

IF A MAN wishes to develop a swift race horse he must first understand much about the nature of horses; if he would build a powerful engine he must needs understand something of mechanics; if he would build a house he must have at least a working knowledge of building materials, of proportion, of stresses and strains, and what not. Similarly, he who undertakes to work with men must, unless he wishes to invite certain failure, understand something of human nature, which is to say, what kind of a being man is, what can be done with him, what one may hope from him. It is safe to say that the largest number of attempts to reform and improve man fail because of ignorance concerning human nature.

The science which deals with human nature, which asks what man is, how he came to be, what his destiny is, is known as Anthropology.

There is such a thing as a Masonic Anthropology, or Science of man. Masonry deals with men: it is trying to do certain things with men, to shape them in a certain way, by certain means. Unless Masonry understands the nature of men, and is able to deal successfully with that nature, it will as surely fail as the man fails who tries to operate a farm without any knowledge of agriculture.

What kind of a being is man, as Masonry understands him? It is quite impossible to give any adequate answer to this question inside the limits of so brief a work as this. It is quite impossible even barely to mention all of the most elementary features of such an answer. We are compelled to deal in generalities, and very briefly at that.

We may say, first of all, that to Masonry man is a being that can be educated. This is implied in the Masonic ritual from end to end, and it is taken for granted in every phase of Masonic teachings. The candidate comes in the dark, ignorant, a child, needing to be led about by a guide, and cared for by patent guardians. At the end of initiation he stands on his own feet, he sees the light, he has in him a new vision, a new nature. Under the veil of symbolism the novice is presented as a shapeless stone, or Rough Ashlar, fresh from the quarry. When the "work" is done he is a Perfect Ashlar, a stone hewn and finished, ready for its place in the wall. If this can happen to a man inside the lodge from it can happen outside; if a man can be born again under Masonic influences, he can also be born again under other equally powerful influences. To Masonry man is not a static being: he is educable, and by educable is meant, not that every man can be given a school training, but that man, by his nature, is capable of growth, of improvement, of development.

How would you define "anthropology"? How would you go about the scientific study of human nature? What would such a study include? Of what value is it to us in our every day life? Why do we have a "Masonic Anthropology"? How would you answer the question, What does Masonry teach concerning the nature of man?

This view of human nature is optimistic, and it is therefore unfortunate that all cannot hold it. But such is the case, for there are many who cling to some form of fatalism about man. These may not believe that man's life is fixed by the stars, as the astrologers once believed, but it amounts to the same thing. They may believe that before man was created God preordained all the details of his life; or they may with certain scientists, hold that man's life is wholly shaped by environment; or they may think that accident or luck shapes all. In any event these persons hold that man is a being helpless to change himself: if he is strong he can never become weak; if he is weak he can never become strong. Man is a static being, of a fixed and unchangeable nature; what he is, that he had to be, and will ever remain.

To the Mason this is a cardinal error. He is under no illusions about human nature. He knows how weak we all are; how much viciousness remains in the most saintly nature; how ignorant the aver-