

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY AND WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE IN FREEMASONRY?

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Part I: Subduing Passions

Often when an individual seeks to know what exactly the word philosophy signifies they are met, whether in writing or as the verbal communication from a well-intentioned instructor, with the response that philosophy is the love of wisdom. Although this answer serves the purpose of providing the neophyte with the literal interpretation of the combination of two Greek words (philos + Sophia), it does not provide a framework from which the individual can then begin the activity of philosophizing. Specifically, the definition does not provide the tools for the individual to seek that which they are to love, namely wisdom. This being the case, then the question has not truly been answered, especially for the recently initiated Masonic brother, who now desires to begin the activity of philosophizing. In a fraternity, which claims to be philosophical at its core, if we do not answer this question sufficiently then our members are at a severe disadvantage when compared to those who are adept.

A phrase in which all masons should be familiar, but is scarcely investigated, is the controlling or subduing of passions. This concept is connected to the beginning precepts of the fraternity and sets forth the aim of the fraternity for the novice initiate. Complexity of meaning arises from the consequential nature of the phrase, which dictates that the initiate must perform some action, and this action is self-focused, that this action might be completed. This in turn, necessarily means that the phrase in question, being part of a larger philosophy of life, contains the assumption that to subdue passions is actually possible. It also forces the initiate and anyone hearing the phrase to ask, if it is indeed their intent to subdue their passions, how does one subdue their passions. Exoterically, the phrase can be understood to mean gaining control over one's emotions, but that meaning could be taken as directing the individual to act in a calm manner. Without assigning value to such an act, it must be considered that the phrase is conjunctionally connected to the act of improving oneself in masonry. However, acting in a calm manner seems to over simplify the process of improving oneself in this way.

So then, what does the phrase really mean? Since the phrase is connected conjunctionally by the word "and" to the phrase "improve oneself in masonry," and both are to be taken within the context of the fraternity, which claims to be philosophical at the core, then the meaning of subduing the passions is linked to the improvement sought by the individual. Therefore, it can now be assumed that subduing the passion goes beyond acting in a calm manner, because the attachment to the phrase, improve myself in masonry, means that subduing the passion is necessary and somewhat catalytic in the occurrence of this improvement. If passion is acceptable to mean emotion, then progress can be made in the assigning of meaning to the entire phrase, subdue the passion. For one who has no control of their emotions is said to lack judgment, thus rendering them out of control in whatever the activity. Let's assume that the activity in which one is engaged is the seeking of information to help one live better. If one has no control in this area, then clearly one does accept a path on the basis of virtue or truth. A correct path may be occasionally chosen, but to do so would be strictly left to chance. That said, subduing the passion, analyzed in this manner, is clearly shown to be a foundational part of the Masonic philosophy which gives to the individual the ability to make judgments based on virtue or truth as opposed to being out of control, emotionally.

Now, a closer examination of the characteristics of philosophy, those characteristics, which allow for the deduction of a usable meaning to attach to the idea of subduing our passions, can be thought of as a systematic critical analysis. Systematic critical analysis, synonymous with philosophy, is what separates someone who pontificates on a matter without a sure way of knowing if their conclusions are useful, and one skilled in philosophy. One skilled in philosophy always aims towards truth or virtue, constantly engages in epistemology (theory of knowledge), and tests all theories by way of logic (art of reason). As stated above, philosophy translated directly from the Greek means the love of wisdom. The idea to be understood by this meaning is that whatever is loved is sought out or pursued. Also, in this meaning, wisdom is equated with virtue. Epistemology or a theory of knowledge is extremely important where philosophy is concerned, having its focus on constantly insuring that the burden of proof is met. Lastly, logic undergirds all that is done in philosophy by providing the method for such a systematic critical analysis. It is logic that lessens the spurious possibilities, guiding the philosopher safely towards the most plausible conclusions.

In every action performed an experience is had and there is the possibility for knowledge to be gained. Oftentimes what stifles the ability to obtain truth from an experience is over-reliance on perceived knowledge. That is, for the ordinary person, rarely does knowledge move beyond their untested perception of reality. Therefore, the search begins, first, with the question and then another, which may require the development of a method or system to do further investigation. This continues until, at

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last, the philosopher becomes satisfied that a clearer reality has been found. Plotinus, the Neo-Platonist philosopher, had this to say,

All men [humans] from their beginning, as soon as they are born, employ sense perception before intellect and sense-objects are necessarily the first which they encounter. Some of them stay here and live through their lives considering these to be primary and ultimate, and since they consider what is painful and pleasant in them to be evil and good respectively, they think this is enough, and pass their lives pursuing the one and contriving to get rid of the other.¹

Plotinus makes the point that sense perception, although being a natural state is not optimum for decisions concerning the interpretation or evaluation of experience. As freemasons attempting to subdue our passion, we must find a means whereby we are to move beyond sense perception. Within the fellow craft degree, masons are exposed in brief, to an educational system that provides the means that will enable them to subdue their passions, allowing masons to move beyond sense perception. This educational system is known as the seven liberal arts, which in medieval times were referred to as the trivium and the quadrivium. The trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) is derived from the Latin word, which means three ways and refers to the three arts of language that pertain to the mind.² The quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy) is derived from the Latin word, which means four ways and refers to the four arts of quantity that pertain to matter.³ For the purpose of this article, the focus will be upon the three arts of the trivium.

These three arts form the foundation upon which is built the Masonic ability to subdue passions. As stated above, humans began to have sensory perception from the moment of being born and many doctors would even make the claim that this phenomenon occurs in the womb. So the question then arises, what gives us the ability to interpret experiences and communicate them to others accurately? About this Laszlo Versenyi would write,

What makes a knower a knower is not the truth of a statement but that search for and appropriation of the truth, which alone can result in the acquisition of knowledge rather than opinion. Opinions can be accepted without any work on our part; mere assent to a statement makes it an opinion we hold. Knowledge cannot be acquired in this manner because it requires rational assent, which presupposes rational reflection on the part of the individual...⁴

So then, to subdue passions or to take control of emotions and not accept untested information. Each art in the trivium has a specific role to play in such an important task. Most importantly, it is not the moment of receiving correct information, but it is the development of the faculties through the practice of these arts that creates the philosophical mind ready to seek truth as a way of life.

Bibliographies

Joseph, Mary, Trivium, (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2002)
Plotinus, Ennead [V]

To come soon...

Part Two: Systematic Critical Analysis in Practice
Part Three: Seeking Wisdom/Virtue and the Necessity of Knowledge
Part Four: Freemasonry: a Fraternity Born of Philosophy
as (Spiritual) Way of Life

¹ Plotinus, Ennead [V.9(1)]

² *Mary, Joseph, Trivium*, (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2002), 3.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Laszlo Versenyi, *Socratic Humanism*, (New Haven, CO: Yale, 1963), 112.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brother Anthony Sean Neal was initiated, passed, and raised in Rockport Lodge #439A in Mississippi in 1991. He later moved to Rising Star Lodge #282 also in Mississippi. Career changes caused another move to Atlanta, Ga. where he became a member of W. C. Thomas Lodge #112. It was here that he continued his Masonic journey being received as a Royal Arch Mason in Gate City Chapter #9, greeted as a Royal and Select Master in North Georgia Council #1 and dubbed a Knights Templar St. John Commandery #4.

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