

David Cameron

Our Masonic ritual as a lesson in the history of the development of metaphysical thought

MW Bro. Raymond S. J. Daniels was wont to say that Freemasonry is an educational institution. And it is, yet it teaches in subtle ways. My wife is doing a B.A. in philosophy. When she was doing her introductory courses we would sit and talk about what she was learning. I realized that I had heard of those concepts – in Lodge. My thesis today is that our ritual is actually a survey course in the history of the development of western philosophy, particularly metaphysics.

Metaphysics is defined as the theoretical philosophy of being and of knowing. I had always thought it came from the Greek *meta*, beyond and *physics*, the study of the natural world. But it really comes from the phrase *ta meta ta physika*, the things after “the Physics”¹: that is, the treatise that Aristotle wrote that is situated in the collection after the one on “Physics”! Now-a-days it includes epistemology, the study of knowledge; ontology, the study of existence; and cosmology.²

The first reference to metaphysics when we meet as a Masonic lodge is in the opening. The JW marks the sun at its meridian, the SW marks the setting sun in the West, and the WM, the rising sun. The idea that the sun was the source of all life was an early philosophical construct. Indeed it *is* the energy of the sun that allows crops to grow, and us to live.

Newgrange in County Meath, the Ring of Brodgar in the Orkneys, and Stonehenge in Wiltshire, are Megalithic structures erected somewhere between the 36th and 22th centuries BCE.³ They are solar observatories and magical things happen there at the solstices. Masonic festivals are traditionally held on the two St. John’s days – which are the solstices.

Still in the opening, the WM invokes a blessing from the GAOTU, echoing the ancient philosophy that there is some great power who designed the universe. Before a candidate begins his initiation he must ascribe to this view of the world, in answering the first of the three questions.

He starts his journey by circumambulating the lodge in a clockwise direction, which mirrors the passage of the sun.

After his obligation he is introduced to a more advanced philosophy, the existence of something before the sun: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth... And God said, ‘let there be light – And there was light’.” The Hebrews believed that the sun was not God, but rather that God created the sun. This is then reinforced shortly thereafter when the sun is demoted to being but one of the lesser lights, one that only rules the Day.

The newly entered apprentice is conducted to the West to receive his apron, a badge which he is told is very ancient. But how ancient? Although he does not know it, he is placed by the pillars of King Solomon’s Temple, or at least a picture of them. These pillars were enriched with network, lily-work and pomegranates. pomegranates. Ok, now why am I talking about pomegranates? In the second chapter of the Hebrew Book of Genesis we read of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And what is this tree? An apple tree? The scriptures do not actually say the word “apple”. We think of it as an apple since it has been traditionally depicted in Western European art as a tree with red fruit, but apples are not native to the Middle East. They come from a more northerly clime – in the mountains of Kazakhstan.⁴ The red fruit most likely to have been envisioned by the scribes of Genesis was the pomegranate. And this makes sense scripturally. Pomegranates, from the exuberance of their seeds, denote plenty. Not just plenty of food, but plenty of offspring. The knowledge Adam and Eve got in trouble for, was the knowledge of sex. “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.”⁵ Our candidate is given his first apron here, by the pillar with the pomegranates. And we accept the concept of a god who will punish vice.

The JW’s lecture is a bit helter-skelter in terms of chronology but it touches on several schools of philosophy. There are the usages and customs of the Egyptian philosophers. Here I quote from an article in *Reflections* written by V. W. Bro. Iain Mackenzie:

The Book of the Dead written over 4600 years ago refers to “the hidden things of Re-Stau” an allusion to the ceremonies performed at Saqqara in the sanctuary of Sekar, the God of death. No information had been recorded as to the actual ceremonies or modes of recognition used in these mysteries. We can speculate that they were similar to the better known Greek ones since the early Greeks inherited a strong cultural influence from Egypt. The Book of the Dead describes what is probably the remains of a Neolithic cult connected with the phenomena of growth. In its pages we find password and countersign, and all the material necessary to the existence of such a secret cult. We can reasonably conclude that the Greek mysteries, and possibly also the Egyptian ones that preceded them, were also distinguished by “password and countersign”⁶

We know little of the Egyptian mystery cults, perhaps because they took oaths not to print, carve or engrave anything – and they didn't! But the Greek mystery cults highlight the division between the sacred and the profane and the need to hide their secrets from the eyes of those who would not understand.

“The ancient Egyptians conceived the sky as a roof placed over the world supported by columns placed at the four cardinal points. The Earth was a flat rectangle, longer from north to south”⁷. That sounds like a parallelepipedon to me!

The Babylonians and Assyrians envisioned “a six-level universe consisting of three heavens and three earths: two heavens above the sky, the heaven of the stars, the earth, the underground of the [oceans], and the underworld of the dead.”⁸

The early Greek version of this was similar; there was a dome above the earth which was studded with stars. The sun and the moon moved across the sky just below this dome. Our abode, the earth, was below the moon – “sub-lunary”. And below the earth was Hades. One could fairly easily descend into the underworld and visit the dead, as Orpheus did. And the gods regularly descended from on high to mess around with humans.

Some Greeks were very concrete about the details of this model. They said that if one were to drop a bronze anvil from the heavens, it would take nine days to reach the earth. Assuming that there is an atmosphere all the way (because the Greeks didn't know about the vacuum of outer space, as far as I know) and assuming that the anvil falls pointy end down and therefore has a drag similar to an artillery shell, I calculate the dome of the heavens would be about a fifth of the way to the moon. However, if you take into account the vacuum of space and the decrease in gravity over distance, it would be much farther, somewhere out past Pluto. I'll leave it to any engineers in the audience to calculate this more exactly.

Later Greeks, figuring out that the earth was round from watching its shadow in eclipses and by watching ships sail over the horizon, “postulated that the earth was a sphere in the center of a series of hollow spheres. The stars were fixed on the outer spherical shell, and the planets on smaller shells within. Each day the stellar sphere rotated from east to west while the planetary spheres rotated from west to east at various rates.”⁹ Pythagoras felt this movement created a sound, the “harmony of the spheres” and attempted to use mathematics to explain it.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that one of the pulsars in Terzan 5, which is in Sagittarius, spins at 716 Hz. If you hook a radio telescope up to a simple amplifier and speakers instead of a computer, this comes out as a sound – F#.¹¹

The Junior Warden briefly returns to Abraham and David and the tribal god of that era of thought. And then the model of the earth covered by a starry firmament which one can access by the assistance of a ladder.

He then explains the mosaic pavement. The black and white checkerboard embodies the Zoroastrian dualism of life being a perpetual battle between Good and Evil, Truth and Lies, Order and Chaos. There is one God, but there is also a force of evil in the world. And with our free will, we are constantly required to choose.

As we walk on the mosaic pavement, we are admonished to let our ideas recur to the original which we copy. This is an allusion to Plato's Theory of Forms in which everything here on earth is but an imperfect copy of the ideal Form, the ideal Form residing with the gods, presumably above the starry firmament. I was struck (for reasons which will become apparent) by this explanation of Plato's theory:

"The relationship of appearance to reality in Plato's worldview can perhaps be best grasped in the context of mathematics. A ring or a princely diadem or the perimeter of a [Greek] hoplite shield might seem to the casual observer to be a circle, but these round objects are not circles in the same sense that the locus of all points in a given plane equidistant from a given point is a circle. They only look like circles; if you were to put them under a magnifying glass you would see that they were not circles at all, merely objects vaguely circular in appearance that bring to mind the Form of a circle. Only the circle depicted in the mathematical definition is a circle. Some people might say that these concrete objects are real circles whereas the geometrical concept is imaginary, but Plato was not one of these people. For Plato, only the concept is real. The tangible objects are debased copies, feeble imitations of the ideal Form."¹²

And lastly, as a counter to all those philosophers who believed that we are unable to truly know the will of God, we are pointed to the VOSL and the remaining of the three questions.

In a hint of what is to come in the Second Degree, the examination before passing has the candidate expound the Copernican model of a heliocentric planetary system, with the planets orbiting the sun. How he is to have learned this scientific concept before the Second Degree, I don't know. I guess some private mentoring is expected.

Or perhaps it was a test. Espousing rationalist ideas at one time could get you arrested - like Galileo, or even burned at the stake like Giordano Bruno. And so the Masons wanted to know where you stood on progressive philosophy before they went any further. This question was probably more important than the three before initiation!

After all, the first degree was just a retrospective of what had been believed in the past. There was no danger in discussing that.

The Second Degree, however, is about the radical ideas of the Enlightenment: which they called Natural Philosophy, and which we now call Science. In the Second Degree the brother is admonished several times to make the liberal arts and sciences his study. The basic course of study in a medieval university consisted of the Trivium (from which the derogatory, anti-intellectual term “trivial” comes – much like “academic”) and the Quadrivium. The basic course of study in a medieval university consisted of the Trivium and the Quadrivium. The Trivium (Tri- vium, meaning three roads or three ways) consisted of grammar, rhetoric and logic: those basic arts which are needed to formulate and communicate ideas. The Quadri-vium (four roads): arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, were the sciences. Now before you make the objection that music is an art not a science, consider those composers like Stravinsky and Satie, and, in fact, J.S. Bach, in whose compositions the mathematical backbone is so evident. One of the other main passions of Pythagoras was to codify the mathematics behind music – he is said to have devised the mathematical basis of harmony by observing the sounds made by different sizes of hammers used by blacksmiths striking anvils, although not likely anvils which fell from the heavens. Although this is not likely true he may well have discovered the intervals produced by dividing the length of strings.¹³ And remember the sounds made by the planetary spheres rubbing against each other? – the harmony of the spheres?

There are several references to science in the Second Degree but not many specifics other than that it is not incompatible with religion. Indeed, the early Enlightenment philosophers believed that although we must use our rational minds to understand things, nature was devised by God. “The man who is free from superstition and free from infidelity; who, in nature, sees the finger of the Eternal Master.”¹⁴ It never occurred to me until I was writing this that “infidelity” here does not mean what today comes to mind; rather “in-fidelity” means “not having faith”. The natural philosophers of the 17th century believed in the existence of God and that the study of nature held the key to the knowledge of the Divine.

Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Isaac Newton and indeed most of the founders of the Royal Society, are claimed to have been Freemasons.¹⁵ Like them, we are exhorted to contemplate the intellectual faculties, and to trace them from their development, through the paths of heavenly science even unto the throne of God Himself.

Before 1730 there were only two degrees¹⁶ and with the Second Degree we complete our historical review. Since then we seem to have parted ways with the natural philosophers, but much has happened in philosophy and cosmology since then – Nietzsche, Sartre,

Einstein and Hawking. Let's discuss those philosophical concepts at the festive board. Don't be afraid to speak up: as a Craftsman in our private assemblies, you may offer sentiments and opinion on such subjects as are regularly introduced in the lecture.

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- 3 various Wikipedia pages
- 4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apple>
- 5 Genesis 3:7, King James Version
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- 7 http://physics.ucr.edu/~wudka/Physics7/Notes_www/node25.html#SECTION02212000000000000000
- 8 <http://abyss.uoregon.edu/~js/ast123/lectures/lec01.html>
- 9 Pomeroy, Sarah, et al., *Ancient Greece, 3rd Ed.*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York, 2012, p. 145
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Kaspi, Victoria, from a lecture given at Perimeter Institute, February 3, 2016
- 12 Ibid. p. 394
- 13 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pythagoras#Musical_theories_and_investigations
- 14 Klotz, Otto, from a speech given at a Ladies' Night at Alma Lodge No. 39, December 27, 1864
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- 16 Bradley, David, *Penetrating the Veil*, Masonic Holdings, Hamilton, 1997