

Freemasonry's System of Morality What makes it so peculiar and why do we hide it?

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***Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality,
veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.***

One of the most common explanations of Freemasonry is that it is a “peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.” But this definition immediately raises the questions what about Freemasonry's “system of morality” makes it so peculiar, and why did our founders believe it necessary to veil? Can a simple code of ethics really be so different that it must be kept secret?

The symbols we use in our ritual are nothing more than the working tools we use to explain our philosophical and ethical concepts, and as such are ordinary enough. In the Entered Apprentice lecture, we are taught the virtues of courage, justice, wisdom, and moderation, which taken together forge a basic code of right conduct. But these virtues are hardly unique; they first appeared over 2,000 years ago in what historians call the Axial Age (800 BCE to 200 BCE).

During this time, simultaneously and independently, the spiritual foundations of humanity were formed by teachers such as Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) in India, Confucius in China, and Socrates in Greece. They all taught the same basic truth: walk the middle path (on the level), live a moral life (by the plumb), and do unto others as you would have them do unto you (on the square). The philosophy that came out of this time would heavily influence later Christian thought and the rise of Western civilization, and today remain the foundations upon which humanity still subsists.

But if Freemasonry does nothing more than repackage a philosophy that had been around for a long time, then what about our *Masonic* system makes it so peculiar? Some argue that it is not our morality that is peculiar, but rather the means we use to achieve our ends. In other words, the peculiarity of our system is merely the unique means we employ—using stone mason's working tools and the Hiram story (allegory and symbols)—to make good men better.

But teaching complex principles through allegory is not terribly unique either. The most familiar example to us of course is Jesus, who made frequent use of parables to teach the good news of the New Testament. And the Golden Rule that Jesus taught was a direct product of the Axial Age. In conclusion, if Freemasonry only seeks to make good men better through the familiar practice of telling colorful stories, then why then did our 17th century brethren go to such extravagant lengths to keep their work a secret? There is nothing novel about our ethical code, nor unique in the means we use to impart it. Our *peculiarity*, and the reasons for its *secrecy*, must lie elsewhere.

Throughout most of history, men were the subjects of princes who ruled by divine right. And in appreciation for this divine right, the princes supported the priests, who demanded strict adherence to religious orthodoxy. Together, Church and State formed a mighty fortress that protected the privileged status of both prince and priest. Man owned neither his body nor his soul.

There was, however, one exceptional time in history when men did live free, and interestingly, this was during the Axial Age. It began in 508 BCE with the founding of two great republics, one in Athens and the other in Rome. From the Latin *res publica* (literally a thing of the people), a republic is a political system where the people retain control over their government. But after 500 years, the Roman Senate's ultimate capitulation to Octavian in 27 BCE brought this first republican era to an abrupt end. It would take almost two millennia before the world would attempt another republican experiment, and common people would again demand democracy.

And when that time came, it came in the most unlikely of places: a tiny group of colonies along the coast of a new world an ocean away. It was here, along the eastern seaboard of North America, that something remarkable happened: the world's first liberal revolution. Led by men inspired by the ancient Greco-Roman concept of a Republic of Virtue, these men stood up to a divinely enthroned monarch and demanded their freedom of choice and liberty of conscious. Slaves no more, these men put into practice the principles of the Enlightenment, a hallmark of which was construction of a wall that separated Church from State. And these men were, in large part, Freemasons, the most famous of course being the father of our country, George Washington.

Other liberal revolutions followed, in France in 1789, Haiti in 1791, Latin American in 1813, Italy and Hungary in 1848, Mexico in 1855, and Cuba in 1895. And the leaders of all of these liberal revolutions—*all of them*—George Washington, Georges Danton, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Simon Bolivar, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Lajos Kossuth, Benito Juarez, and Jose Marti—were Freemasons. They all worked to overthrow despotic regimes supported by religious orthodoxy.

The philosophy that inspired these revolutionary leaders did not spring forth out of a vacuum. Looking back a few decades to find the philosophical underpinnings of these revolutions, one seminal event stands out: the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge of England on June 24, 1717. I think that we have found the *political* danger in our “peculiar system” that caused our historical brethren to hide it so carefully. For each of the courageous Freemasons who led these liberal revolutions was condemned as a traitor long before he was hailed as a hero. Clearly, there were political reasons for keeping the philosophy of Freemasonry secret! But politics is only part of our story, and for the rest, we must again look to the Enlightenment.

While scholars may debate the event that marked the beginning of the Enlightenment, the formation of The Royal Society in 1660 certainly marks its golden age. We can find its first stirrings, however, on February 17, 1600, the day the Church and State conspired together to light the fires of ignorance. It was on this day that Giordano Bruno, an Italian

Dominican friar, philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer, born in 1548, was burned alive as a heretic. Bruno was burnt for two ideas: one cosmological, and the other theological. Both proved fatal.

His unorthodox cosmological idea was that neither the Earth nor the Sun are the center of the Universe. Moving even beyond even Copernicus (who believed that the sun was the center of the Universe), Bruno, anticipating what modern science would later prove right, taught that our Sun was just one of an infinite number of independently moving heavenly bodies. It would take the rest of the world over a century to catch up.

Curiously, Bruno's cosmological heresy is found almost word for word in the “G” lecture of the Fellow Craft degree: “numberless worlds are around us, rolling through unlimited space . . .” The “G” lecture emphasizes Geometry as the unerring law of nature that governs the universe. In our “G” we find Bruno's cosmological heresy writ large and enshrined in the East of every Masonic Lodge. While this teaching would be familiar to any school age child today, when we consider that our ritual dates back to a time when such beliefs had dire life and death consequences, the reason for our secrecy again becomes plain.

But this cosmological view was only the lesser of Bruno's heresies. A far greater error was Bruno's theological heresy, one that truly shook the church to its foundations. Bruno's greater heresy was teaching that god and nature and the universe are one in the same, and that god is an immanent presence through the universe rather than a transcendent and sentient anthropomorphic being separate from it. His was a Universe of infinite space and time, with no need for a Creator nor expectation of a Last Judgment. This idea remains heretical today.

Bruno's thoughts were the first revival of the great philosophies from the Axial Age, and would later become known as *Pantheism*. Pantheism is the belief that the Universe (Nature) and God are the same. It was because of this second heresy that Bruno was burned. It would take two of humanity's greatest minds, the physicists Isaac Newton and Steven Hawking, to rehabilitate Bruno. Newton, in revealing the laws of nature that govern the Universe, validated Bruno's cosmology. Hawking, in his most recent book [*The Grand Design*](#), dispenses with the need for a creator, folding the concept of god into the Universe, redeeming Bruno's theology.

Retuning to Freemasonry's “G”, it always struck me as odd that we reuse the letter “G” as a symbol for both God and Geometry. When God is called so many different names—Yahweh, Jehovah, Allah, the Holy Spirit—it seems somewhat disrespectful to pick just one letter of the alphabet. Freemasonry certainly has other more elegant symbols at its disposal to represent deity, like the all-seeing eye or blazing star, so why use the single letter “G” for both? Is Freemasonry hiding Bruno's second Pantheist heresy, using the same symbol *symbolically* to imply that Geometry (the laws of nature governing the Universe) and God are really one in the same? If true, such a secret would be a cryptic feat worthy of the best Dan Brown thriller!

To bring the treasonous politics of Freemasonry's peculiar system of morality together with its heretical implications, we turn finally to Euclid and his 47th Proposition. But this is not the Euclid you expect, nor is his 47th problem $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$.

This Euclid is Benedict Spinoza, an excommunicated Dutch Jewish philosopher of Portuguese descent. Born in 1632, he published his influential works during the crucial formative years of the Enlightenment, the same time that modern Freemasonry was evolving. Even though he was considered by Friedrich Hegel as the greatest philosopher, you will find little mention of him in popular works on philosophy. He may be a mere footnote in the mainstream, but when Albert Einstein was asked if he believed in God, he replied "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings."

Spinoza's magnum opus was a book simply entitled *Ethics*. He wrote it in the style of mathematical proofs, just like the ancient Euclid wrote *Elements*, the masterpiece that served as the standard geometrical textbook for two millennia. Because of this peculiar writing style, and the influence of his work, Spinoza can be thought of as the Euclid of the Enlightenment. *Ethics* is a very difficult read, which perhaps accounts for why it is not given much respect in many textbooks. To be fair, the best minds today still argue about what his work really means. Is he a pantheist? An atheist? Or just a misunderstood converted Jew?

Spinoza's purpose in writing *Ethics* was clearly a pedagogic one, that is, to foster an ideal state of human character, or, in other words, to make good men better.¹ *Ethics* is a book that begins with God and ends with human freedom. At first, *Ethics* seems to be an inscrutable chain of obtuse propositions, but closer examination proves it to be a journey whereby the mind embarks on an exodus from a state of bondage to false beliefs and systems of power to the promised land of clarity and self-knowledge, which culminate in his 47th proposition:

Prop. XLVII. The human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God.

It is a work of moral therapy that seeks to liberate the reader from the power of the passions and give us control over our lives. The hope of *Ethics* is to convert passions into actions, not by repressing human affectivity but by bringing it to a higher level of self-consciousness. In other words, his *Ethics* lays the foundation for a peculiar system of morality that teaches men to circumscribe their desires and keep their passions within due bounds with all mankind.

Ethics is much interested in the virtues required for social and political life, chief among these being friendship and the responsibility for each of us to consider the needs of society. For Spinoza, accepting responsibility is a necessary component of human

¹ This comment and those that follow are derived from the book *Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics*, by Steven B. Smith, Yale University Press, © 2003. Further citations are omitted.

freedom. He teaches us not only to take responsibility for our lives but to find joy and happiness in doing so. Put another way, Spinoza calls on each of us to spread the cement of brotherly love and affection, and unite with all mankind as a society of friends and brothers, among whom no contention (religious or political) should ever exist, but that noble contention, or rather emulation, of who can best work and best agree.

Ethics remains of interest today because it builds the foundation for modern democratic individualism and the separation of church and state. Heretofore, ethics and moral law were centered in religious orthodoxy. From the Code of Hammurabi to the Ten Commandments of Moses, the moral law had always come directly from the hand of God. And man obeyed . . . not out of his intrinsic desire to be good, but out of fear for the salvation of his immortal soul. Man's unreasoning imagination, encompassing both his hopes and his fears, kept him in a state of mental slavery, a prisoner not only of his passions and superstitious beliefs, but also to the various ecclesiastical and political authorities who profited from his enslaved condition.

But in *Ethics*, Spinoza put forth a new foundation for a moral code—reason—and with reason as its core this moral code could serve everyone. The value of life as an end in itself forms its cornerstone. Our powers of attaining the objects of our desires depend upon the help and cooperation of others. **Reason—not fear of divine punishment—dictates cooperation as a means to our self-preservation.** While the passions are the cause of conflict, reason is the source of community and consensus. Reason helps us see our common advantage. And it is reason that is the touchstone of the Enlightenment.

To become a Freemason, a candidate must affirm his belief in god. He takes the oaths of Freemasonry at an altar upon which rests the Volume of Sacred Law (generally the Holy Bible) which he accepts as the rule and guide of his life. But Freemasonry accepts as brothers those who believe in different gods, and place different Volumes of Sacred Law on their lodge altars. How can this be? How do we reconcile this brotherhood among those from different cultures who adhere to different religious beliefs when almost all of these religions teach an exclusive path to god and salvation?

I believe that we find our answer in Spinoza's *Ethics*, where, for the first time, the world has a system of morality based on reason alone. Each of us can worship God in our own way, but in addition to the divine moral code taught by our personal religious beliefs, we now have a human moral code independent of god that can be shared by all. It is, I believe, this second **rational** basis for morality that is so peculiar about Freemasonry's *peculiar system of morality*. And as such, it easily stands side by side with the theistic based moral codes, not as a replacement, **but as a companion** . . . the point on the center around which all humanity can unite as one.

At the beginning of his work, Spinoza stated that his philosophy would not describe human nature as it ought to be, but merely as it is. But in doing so, he transformed everything that he touched. His code disarms and transcends both religion and politics. In the end, the point of his philosophy was not just to interpret the world, but to redeem it.² This is the work of Freemasonry. We have finally found the object of our quest.

² *Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics*, by Steven B. Smith, Yale University Press, © 2003