

# **THE PHILOSOPHY OF MASONRY**

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by  
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## V A TWENTIETH-CENTURY MASONIC PHILOSOPHY

WE have long outgrown the notion that Masonry is to be held to one purpose or one object or is to be hemmed in by the confines of one philosophy. If we are taught truly that the roof of the Mason's workshop is nothing less than the "clouded canopy or starry-decked heavens," nothing that goes on beneath that capacious covering can be wholly alien to us. Our Fraternity is to be of all men and for all men; it is to be of all time and for all time. The needs of no one time and of no one people can circumscribe its objects. The philosophy of no one time, of no one people, and much more of no one man, can be admitted as its final authority. Hence it is no reproach to Masonry to have, along with lessons and tenets for all times, a special lesson and a special tenet for each time, which is not to be insisted on at other times. Truth, after all, is relative. Vital truths to one time cannot be put into pellets or boluses to be administered to all times to come. If the Craft is to be perpetual, it must appeal to each time as well as to all times; it must have in its traditions something that today can use, although yesterday could not use it and tomorrow need not. We are a Craft of workmen. It is our glory to be engaged in useful service. Our rites and usages are not merely a proud possession to be treasured for their beauty and antiquity. They are instruments imparted to us to be used. Hence we may properly inquire, what can we make of this wonderful tradition of which we are the custodians that will serve the world of today?

One is indeed rash who essays a philosophy of Masonry after such masters as Krause and Oliver and Pike. But I have tried to show heretofore how largely their philosophies of Masonry grew out of the time and the philosophical situation at the time when they severally thought and wrote. Thus Preston wrote in the so-called "age of reason," when Knowledge was supposed to be the one thing needful. Krause wrote moral philosophy, so-called, was a chief concern in Germany, and he was primarily a leader in the philosophy of law.

Oliver wrote under the influence of Romanticism in England, at a time when German idealism was coming into English thought. Pike wrote under the influence of the reaction from the materialism of last half of the nineteenth century and under the influence of the nineteenth century metaphysical method of unifying all things by reference to some basic absolute principle.

In the same way a present-day philosophy of Masonry will necessarily relate itself to present-day modes of thought and to the present situation in philosophy. Consequently we may predict that it will have four characteristics.

1. Its metaphysical creed will be either idealistic-monistic--or else pragmatist-pluralistic. Although my personal sympathies are with the latter view, so that in a sense I should range myself with Preston and Krause rather than with Oliver and Pike, I suspect that our twentieth-century Masonic philosopher will adhere to the former. He will probably hold, to quote Paulsen, that "reality, which is represented to our senses by the corporeal world as a uniform system of movements, is the manifestation of a universal spiritual life that is to be conceived as an idea, as the development of a unitary reason, a reason which infinitely transcends our notions." Hence he will probably range himself with Oliver and Pike. But he will despair of comprehending this reason through knowledge or through tradition or of completely expressing it in a single word. And so, if by chance he should be a pragmatist, the result will not be very different, since the philosophy of Masonry is a part of applied philosophy and the results count for more than the exact method of attaining them. Moreover in the three following characteristics, idealist and pragmatist will agree, merely coming to the same results by different routes.

2. Its psychology will be voluntaristic rather than intellectualistic; that is, under the influence of modern biology it will insist upon giving a chief place to the will. It will have faith in the efficacy of conscious human effort.

3. What is more important for our purpose, its standpoint will be teleological. To quote Paulsen once more: "Ethics and sociology, jurisprudence and politics are about to give up the old formalistic treatment and to employ instead the teleological method: purpose governs life, hence the science of life, of individual as well as of collective life, must employ this principle." In other words, as it would have been put formerly, the philosophy of Masonry will be treated as a part of practical rather than of pure philosophy.

4. It will have its roots in history. This is the distinguishing mark of modern philosophical thought. The older philosophies conceived of reality along the lines of mathematics and of the physical sciences. Today we endeavor to interpret nature historically. As Paulsen says, we essay to interpret it "according to a logical genetical scheme."

Such are the lines which modern philosophy is following, and such, we may be confident, are the lines which the philosophy of Masonry will follow, unless, indeed, some philosopher of the stamp of Krause, capable of striking out new paths in philosophy at large, should busy himself with this special field. Can we construct a philosophy of Masonry that will conform to these lines? In attempting to answer this question, I should lay down three fundamental principles at the outset: (1) We must not be dogmatic. We must remember that our ideal is the ideal of an epoch, to serve the needs of time and place. (2) Nevertheless we must seek an end. We must have before us the idea of purpose, since we are in the realm of practical philosophy. (3) We must base our conception of the ideal of our Masonic epoch and our idea of purpose upon the history of institutions. Thus we get three modes of approach to our immediate subject.

1. Let us first turn to the current philosophies and inquire what they may do for us. How far may we build on some one or on all of them? What does Masonry call for which they can or cannot give?

The oldest and perhaps the most authoritative system of philosophy current today is absolute idealism, in many forms, indeed, but with a recognizable essential unity. This philosophy puts life in a world of thought. It thinks of the world of experience which we perceive through our senses as appearance. Reality is in the world of thought. But these are not two distinct worlds. Rather they are related as cause and effect, as that which animates and that which is animated. It regards God, not as a power outside of the world and transcending it, but as that which permeates it and connects it and gives it unity. It regards reality as a connected, a unified whole and conceives that life is real in so far as it is a part of this whole. Hence it conceives we must turn steadfastly and courageously from the superficial realm of appearance in which our senses put us, and set ourselves "in the depth of reality"; we are to bring ourselves into relation with the whole and to develop ourselves from within so as to reach the whole. To use Eucken's phrases, each life is to "evolve a morality in the sense of taking up the whole into one's own volition" and subjecting "caprice to the necessity of things," that is, to their necessary inner

interconnection. In this theory of life, the central point is spiritual creative activity. Everything else is but the environment, the means or the logical presupposition. Man is to be raised above himself and is to be saved by spiritual creation.

This philosophy of scholars and for scholars is not a philosophy for Masons. Indeed Pike said of his idealistic system of Masonic philosophy that it was not the Masonry of the multitude. And for this very reason that it is essentially aristocratic, the old idealistic philosophy is fighting a sure though obstinate retreat in our democratic age. There are periods of creative energy in the world and there are periods in which what has been created is organized and assimilated. In the periods of creation, those to whom spiritual creative power is given are relatively few. In a period of assimilation they are few indeed. In such a time, to quote Eucken, the life pictured by the idealist "tends to become mere imagination." "The man imbued with [its] spirit . . . easily seems to himself more than he is; with a false self-consciousness talks and feels as if he were at a supreme height; lives less his own life than an alien one. Sooner or later opposition must necessarily arise against such a half life, such a life of pretence, and this opposition will become especially strong if it is animated by the desire that all who bear human features should participate in the chief goods of our existence and freely co-operate in the highest tasks. . . And so the aristocratic character of Immanent Idealism produces a type of life rigidly exclusive, harsh and intolerable."

Another type of philosophy, which has become more and more current with the advance of science, has been called Naturalism. This philosophy rejects the spiritual life entirely, denying its independence and holding it nothing but a phase or an incident of the existence revealed by the senses. There is no spiritual sphere. Of itself, the spiritual can create nothing. Nor is life anything in itself. All things are valued in terms of biology and of economics. Nothing is intrinsically valuable. Truth means only correct adjustment to the environment; the good is that which best preserves life; the moral is that which makes for social life; the beautiful is a form of the useful. Self preservation is the real inspiration of conduct. I need not argue that this is not a philosophy for Masons, who have faith in God for one of their landmarks. Whatever else we may be consistently with a naturalistic philosophy, we cannot be Masons. For if there is any one test of a Mason it is a test wholly incompatible with this rejection of the spiritual.

Closely connected with naturalism are a variety of social philosophies which have come to have much vogue and in one form, socialism, have given rise to an active propaganda involving almost religious fervor. These philosophies reject the individual life, and hence the individual spiritual life. So far as the individual will is regarded it is because of a social interest in the individual social life. As political or social philosophies some of these systems have very great value. But when they are expanded into universal systems and make material welfare in society--a very proper end in political philosophy--the sole end of the individual life, when they reject the spiritual independence of the individual by making "the judgment of society the test of truth" and expect him to submit his views of good and evil to the arbitrament of a show of hands, when they ignore individual creation and think only of distributing, they run counter to Masonic landmarks, so that we cannot accept them and continue to be Masons. For we hold as Masons that there is a spiritual part of man. We hold that the individual is to construct a moral and spiritual edifice within himself by earnest labor, not to receive one ready-made by a referendum to the judgment of society. Understand me. I do not assert that modern social philosophies are to be cast out utterly. In law, in politics, in social science some of them are achieving great things. But we must think of them as applications, not as universal systems. The problem of the individual life, the demands of the individual spiritual life, which they ignore, are matters of vital concern to the Mason, and he calls for a philosophy which takes account of them. To quote Eucken once more, we cannot assent that the "world of sense is the sole world of man" nor can we "find life entirely in the relation to the environment, be it nature or society."

By way of revolt from naturalistic and social philosophies a modern movement has arisen which has been called aesthetic individualism. It is distinctly a literary and artistic movement and for that very reason ignores the mass of humanity and falls short of our basic Masonic requirement of universality. But it demands a moment's consideration as one of the significant modes of modern thought. In aesthetic individualism, we are told, "the center of life is transferred into the inner tissue of self-consciousness. With the development of this self-consciousness, life appears to be placed entirely on its own resources and directed towards itself. Through all change of circumstances and conditions it remains undisturbed; in all the infinity of that which happens to it, it feels that it is supreme. All external manifestation is valuable to it as an unfolding of its own being; it never experiences things, but only itself." Hence to the aesthetic individualist the end is to "make all the relations and all the externals of life as individual as

possible." He is not to sacrifice the present to the future; he is to reject everything that subjects the development of life to universal standards; he is to ignore all those conventions that fit men into the social order and instead is to cultivate a free relation of individual to individual. To those who accept this doctrine "what is usually called morality is considered to be only a statute of the community, a means by which it seeks to rob the individualist the end is to "make all the relations and all the itself." This philosophy of artists and for artists is too palpably impossible for the Masonic philosopher to require further discussion.

If we turn from these disappointing modern theories of the end of life to systems of applied philosophy, we may do better. Here the idealists have a more fruitful program. Where Hegel regarded all things as the unfolding of an idea either logically or in experience, the recent followers of Hegel, who are the most active force in recent social philosophy, say rather that all social and political and legal institutions are manifestations of civilization. To them the idea which is unfolding in all things human is not some single metaphysical principle; it is the complex idea of human civilization. Our institutions are resultants of the civilization of the past and of attempts to adapt them as we received them, to the civilization of the present. Our task as members of society is to advance civilization by exerting ourselves consciously and intelligently to that end. Every man may do this in some measure in his time and place. So every man may, if he will, retard or obstruct civilization in some degree in his time and place. But from the fact that he is a man and as such a factor in society actually or potentially, he is charged with a duty of exerting himself to maintain and advance civilization, of which as the ultimate idea, society is a mere agent. So far as we may, we must each of us discover the principles which are presupposed by the civilization of today and we must exert ourselves consciously to mold institutions thereto and to regulate conduct thereby. The universal thing, the reality is civilization among men. To paraphrase a well-known formula, God is the eternal, not ourselves, that makes for civilization. Here, then, we have a modern system that comports with the fundamenta of Masonry and with our philosophical demands. It recognizes the spiritual side of man as something which civilization both presupposes and develops. It has a God. It is not for a scholarly or artistic aristocracy. It is of and for all men as partakers in and, if they will be, agents of a universal human culture. Moreover it meets our first requirement. It is not dogmatic. It recognizes that civilization is something that is constantly advancing and hence is changing. It realizes that civilization, for that very reason, is a matter of time and place and hence that the principles it presupposes at any

time and place, which we take for our ideals, are ideals of an epoch and principles to serve the needs of time and place. And yet all these stages transient forms of human culture merge in a general and a constantly growing human civilization which is the reality both in ourselves and outside of ourselves.

2. Again the new idealism of practical philosophy meets our second requirement. Even though its adherents recognize that they have no absolute formula for all times, for all places, for all peoples, they have an end, they put before us a purpose. Each of us and all of us are to make for human civilization. Each of us by developing himself as a civilized, in the real sense, as a cultured man according to his lights and his circumstances can find reality in himself and can bring others and the whole nearer to the reality for which we are consciously or unconsciously striving--the civilization of mankind. The knowledge which Preston sought to advance, the perfection of man at which Krause aimed, the relation to God which Oliver sought to attain and the harmony and through it control of the universe which Pike took for the goal, may well be regarded as phases of and as summed up in the one idea of human civilization.

3. How far does this new idealism, or as its adherents call it, this neo-Hegelianism, meet our third requirement? Has it a sound basis in the history of human institutions generally and the history of our institution in particular? Here at least the Masonic neo-idealist is upon sure ground.

Anthropologists and sociologists have shown us that next to the family, which indeed antedates society, the most primitive and most universal of social institutions is the association of grown men in a secret society. The simplest and earliest of the institutions of social man is the "men's house"--a separate house for the men of the tribe which has some analogies among civilized peoples of antiquity, e.g. the common meal of the citizens at Sparta, the assembly of the men in the agora in an ancient Greek community and the meeting of the Roman citizens in assembly in the ancient polity of the Roman city. In this men's house of a primitive tribe is the center of social life. Here the most precious belongings of the community, its religious emblems and its trophies taken in war, are preserved. Here the young men of the tribe gather as a visible token of their separation from their families and their entrance upon the duties and responsibilities of tribal life. Here the elders and leaders have seats according to their dignity and importance. Women and children may not enter; it is the house of the grown men. This wide-spread primitive institution develops in

different ways. Sometimes it results in what are practically barracks for the fighting men of the community, as at Sparta and among some primitive peoples today. Sometimes it becomes a religious center and ultimately in substance a temple. Usually it becomes the center of another stage of social development, that is, of what anthropologists call "the puberty initiation ceremonies" and thence of still another stage, the primitive secret society. And as these societies develop, replacing the earlier tribal puberty initiations, the men's house, as the seat of these organizations, becomes the secret lodge. Hence in this oldest of social institutions, rather than on the highest hills and in the lowest dales of our lectures, we may find the first Masonry.

It is a natural instinct, so sociologists tell us, that leads men of the same age, who have the same interests and the same duties, to group themselves accordingly and to separate to some extent from other groups. In obedience to this instinct, we are told that four classes of the male members of a tribe set themselves off: (1) The boys who have not yet arrived at puberty; (2) unmarried youths; (3) mature men on whom the duties and responsibilities of tribesmen rest, and (4) old men, the repositories of tribal wisdom and the directors of the community. On the attainment of puberty, the boy is taken into the men's house and as it were initiated into manhood. In due time he becomes tribesman and warrior. In process of time his eldest son has himself reached manhood and the father becomes an elder, retired from active service. Thus the men of the tribe become in substance a secret association divided into two or three grades or classes out of which, we are told, as a later development, grow the degrees of primitive secret societies. For the passage from one of these classes to another almost universally among primitive peoples is accompanied by secret initiatory ceremonies, and among almost all primitive peoples, the initiatory ceremonies at puberty are the most solemn and important event in a man's life. Usually they are more or less dramatic. They begin with some sort of ordeal. Often there is a symbolic raising from death to life to show that the child is dead and that a man has risen in his place. Often a great deal of symbolism is employed and there follows something very like a lecture, explaining the ceremony. Always they involve an impressive instruction in the science and the morality of the tribe and an impressive inculcation of obedience.

In time these initiatory ceremonies degenerate or develop, as the case may be, into tribal secret societies pure and simple, and with the progress of civilization and the rise of political and religious systems these societies also decay or lose their character. Thus eventually, out

of this primitive institution of the men's house, which on one side has grown into political organization, on another side, through the initiatory ceremonies, no less than six institutions are developed among different peoples. First there are political, magical and more or less fraudulent secret societies, which are extremely common in Africa today. Second, there are clan ceremonies, becoming in time state ceremonies and state religions. Antiquity abounds in examples of the importance which men attached to these ceremonies. For example, the dictator Fabius, at a critical moment in the campaign against Hannibal, left the army in order to repair to the proper place and perform the clan sacrifices as head of the Fabian gens. Third, there are religious societies, with elaborate ceremonies for the reception of the novice. Such societies exist in Thibet and among the Hindus in striking forms. Fourth, there are the mysteries of antiquity, for example, the Egyptian and the Eleusinian, or sometimes a mixture of the third and fourth, as in the case of the Essenes. Fifth, there are trade societies on the fraternal model, such as the Roman collegia and the trade and operative guilds. Finally there are purely charitable associations, such as the Roman burial societies. Each of these, it will be noted, develops or preserves some side of the primitive tribal secret society. The political and magical societies develop or preserve their political and magical traditions; the clan ceremonies, their function of promoting solidarity by ancestor worship; the religious societies, their moral and religious functions; the mysteries, their symbolical instruction; the trade societies, their function of instruction in useful knowledge; the charitable societies, their function of binding men to duties of relief and of mutual assistance. All preserve the memory of their origin in a tribe of kinsmen by the fiction of brotherhood which they strive to make real by teaching and practice.

The relation of Masonry to this development of societies out of the primitive men's house, as described by non-Masonic scholars with no thought of Masonry, is so obvious, that we may no longer laugh at Oliver's ambitious attempts to find Masonry in the very beginning of things. But apart from its bearing upon Masonic history, this discovery of the anthropologists is significant for Masonic philosophy. For in this same men's house are the germs of civilization; the development of the men's house is a development of civilization, and its end and purpose and the end and purpose of all the legitimate institutions that have grown out of it have been from the beginning to preserve, further and hand down the civilization of the tribe or people. In our universal society, therefore, the end is, and as we study our old charges and our lectures we see it has always been, to preserve, further and hand down a universal, human civilization.

Thus we are enabled to answer the three problems of Masonic philosophy.

1. What is the end of Masonry; for what do we exist as an organization? The answer of the Masonic neo-idealist would be that our end in common with all social institutions is to preserve, to develop and to transmit to posterity the civilization wrought by our fathers and passed on to us.

2. What is the place of Masonry in a rational scheme of human activity? What is its relation to other kindred activities? The answer would be, that it is an organization of human effort along the universal lines on which all may agree in order to realize our faith in the efficacy of conscious effort in preserving and promoting civilization. What other human organizations do along lines of caste or creed or within political or territorial limits hampered by the limits of political feeling or local prejudice, we seek to achieve by universality--by organizing the universal elements in man that make for culture and civilization.

3. How does Masonry achieve its end? Our answer would be that it makes for civilization by its insistence on the solidarity of humanity, by its insistence on universality and by the preservation and transmission of an immemorial tradition of human solidarity and of universality. So conceived, this tradition becomes a force of the first moment in maintaining and advancing civilization. And in this way we connect on the one hand with the practical systems of Preston and of Krause. The ideal of the eighteenth century was knowledge. The ideal of the nineteenth century was the individual moral life. The ideal of the twentieth century, I take it, is the universal human life. But what are these but means toward the advance of human culture? And on the other hand we connect also with Oliver and with Pike. For they were idealists and so are we. Only they sought a simple, static idea of which the universe was a manifestation or an unfolding. We turn rather to a complex and growing idea and claim to do no more than interpret it in terms of the ideals of the time and place.

My brethren, we of all men, owe it to ourselves and to the world, to be universal in spirit. Universality is a lesson the whole world is learning and must learn. But we ought to know it well already. We ought to be upon the front bench of the world's school, setting an example to our more backward school-fellows. Wherever in the world there is a lodge of Masons, there should be a focus of civilization, a center of the idea of universality, radiating reason to put down prejudice and advance

justice in the disputes of peoples, and in the disputes of classes, and making for the peace and harmony and civilization that should prevail in this great lodge of the world.

Moreover, the idea of universality has a special message to the Mason for the good of Masonry. Every world-organization hitherto has been wrecked ultimately upon its own dogmatism. It has taken the dogmas, the interpretations, the philosophy of its youth for a fixed order of nature. It has assumed that universality consisted in forcing these dogmas, these interpretations, this philosophy upon all times to come. While it has rested serene in the ruts made by its own prosperity, the world has marched by it unseen. We have a glorious body of tradition handed down to us from the past, which we owe it to transmit unimpaired to the future. But let us understand what in it is fundamental and eternal, and what is mere interpretation to make it of service to the past. Let us while we have it use it well to make it of service to the present. Yet let us fasten upon it nothing hard and fast that serves well enough to make it useful today, but may make it useless tomorrow. As the apprentice stands in the corner of the lodge, the working tools are put in his hands and he is taught their uses. But they are not his. They are the tools of the lodge. He is to use them that the Worshipful Master may have pleasure and the Craft profit. The Grand Master of the Universe has entrusted to us the principles of Masonry as working tools. They, too, are not ours, they belong to the lodge of the world. We are to use them that He may have pleasure and the Craft of humanity that labors in this wide lodge of the world may profit thereby.

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