

FROM SISYPHUS TO SELF-MASTERY

KNOWLEDGE LEADS TO IMPROVEMENT

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"The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Human existence is characterized by a persistent struggle to understand our place in the universe and find meaning in our lives. We are born into a world of uncertainty, grappling with questions of purpose, free will, and the nature of reality itself. As we mature and acquire knowledge, awareness of our ignorance increases, which leads to existential questions about our purpose, free will and our mortality. Freemasonry provides tools and can equip individuals to address these existential challenges. By examining Masonic principles such as the Four Cardinal Virtues we can gain self-knowledge and insight into our own moral character and discover paths for personal growth and enlightenment through the cultivation of these virtues.

From the moment of birth, we are thrust into a world and bombarded with a flood of sensations void of context and understanding. Our very first experiences come only with a distinction of comfort or discomfort including hunger and the warm embrace of our mother. These early experiences form the rudimentary basis of our understanding of good and evil and lay the foundation for our moral compass.

As we mature and try to find our place in the cosmos, we find ourselves confronted with questions like: What is the nature of our existence? Do we possess free will or are we entirely constrained by our genetics and physical processes? These questions highlight the complexity of human experience and our never-ending search for meaning.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher wrote in his essay titled *Being and Nothingness*, "Thus death is never that which gives life its meanings; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle

removes all meaning from life." This statement suggests that life lacks purpose knowing that you will die someday which leaves us to wrestle with the implications of our mortality.

The concept of mortality raises questions about how we should live our lives. Does discovering our mortality inspire us to make the most of each day, knowing our time is limited? Or does it lead us to nihilism, concluding that life is meaningless?

Masonic philosophy includes the Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude. These virtues form the basis of our moral compass.

1. **Prudence:** The ability to make wise, moral decisions in any situation.
2. **Temperance:** Exercising self-control to maintain balance and avoid excess.
3. **Justice:** Acting with fairness and giving everyone their rightful due.
4. **Fortitude:** The courage to endure challenges with moral strength.

By cultivating these virtues, we can reduce suffering and align our actions with wisdom, moderation, fairness, and courage. These virtues offer a path to living well in the face of existential uncertainty.

The Freemasonry formula, as described by Dan Kemble in *Defining Freemasonry*, is: Learning + Self-Discipline = Self-Improvement. This equation encapsulates the ritual of the Entered Apprentice degree and provides an equation for self-improvement.

While the complexities of life may cause us to wrestle with complex existential questions Freemasonry invites us to answer a more concrete question:

What came ye here to do?

- To learn about the world and my place in it. To learn about myself and observe how I respond to the world.
- To subdue my passions. To be encouraged and have accountability to make wise and moral decisions, while exercising self-control and avoiding excess. To learn how to act with fairness and give others their rightful wages based on individual merit. And to be challenged and face those challenges with strength.
- And improve myself through Masonry. Knowledge, especially self-knowledge, leads to self-improvement. Masonry provides a microcosm where I can act and observe how I respond and how others respond to me which gives a valuable tool for self-improvement.

When we pursue truth with an open mind and a passion for the truth in and of itself as a value all on its own, we discover two primary foundations of human experience: the reality of experience itself and the reality of suffering. These are the two primary realities that stand in stark contrast when compared to all other knowledge. This recognition leads to a strong motivation to avoid suffering. The motivation to avoid suffering leads to searching with the hope that this searching will not be in vain and the tools of self-discipline may be found so that improvement can be made.

The Mosaic Pavement is a checkered floor found in Masonic lodges. This symbol represents the duality of life—the balance between good and evil, light and darkness, joy and sorrow. It serves as a visual reminder of the moral choices we face in life.

Another valuable symbol is Jacob's Ladder, which represents the spiritual ascent from ignorance to enlightenment. As we increase in knowledge and make the decision to turn away from evil, we experience a ratcheting of self-improvement as we seek more and more light.

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that "man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being." While we are no doubt responsible for our way of being in the world our freedom is not absolute. We are, in fact, subject to numerous constraints: temporal, spatial, genetic, cultural, and moral. Our actions are influenced by the decisions of past generations and our actions will, for better or worse, influence future generations. We are hardly free, and recent brain imaging studies, such as those conducted by Chun Siong Soon, have shown that certain neural activities can predict decisions before individuals become consciously aware of them. These findings contribute to the ongoing debate about the nature of free will, and some suggest that study is evidence we do not have any free will.

The truth is likely somewhere in the middle. We are not completely free to experience whatever we wish, and we are not completely constrained like a rock falling off a cliff side. When considering our constraints it can feel very limiting, but I see our constraints and limitations not as a negative confinement but serving a specific purpose. They protect us from the potential dangers of absolute freedom for which we may not be fully prepared. This perspective is illustrated by the fate of many lottery winners or professional athletes who, after suddenly gaining wealth, often struggle to manage their freedom responsibly.

These constraints are not limitations, but they are rules that give structure to our lives. As H.L. Haywood writes in "Symbolical Masonry," "It is our loyalty that sets us free; it is our keeping the rules of the game that yields us the joy and spontaneity of the game".

Meaning cannot be derived from the amount of freedom or limitation one experiences or in the length of one's life, whether its everlasting or fleeting because the very nature of meaning is not external but it is internal. Meaning cannot be found in creating external artifacts that last forever or in having the freedom to do so. Even if we could build an incorruptible object such as a time crystal—a state of matter recently achieved in laboratories—that does not inherently contribute to life's meaning. Instead, what brings life meaning is self-knowledge, seeing how we respond in different situations, and by paying special attention to our thoughts, emotions, and actions.

While we can't control the world we're born into or choose to live forever, we can choose how we react to the world and how we act in the world. Having the courage to choose how we respond gives significant meaning to our life. We have the freedom to willfully take responsibility for our life, respond with compassion, pick up the trowel and the other tools of Masonry and get to work. In doing so we add meaning to our lives.

Life's challenges are opportunities for growth. By practicing self-discipline and continually striving for improvement, we can turn away from disintegration and keep our thoughts on higher ideals and that Celestial Lodge where the Supreme Architect of the Universe resides.

The myth of Sisyphus is often used to illustrate the absurdity of human existence. While Sisyphus's task may seem futile, the meaning lies not in the external task, but in how Sisyphus chooses to approach it.

Sisyphus can find meaning by observing himself and choosing his responses moment to moment. By focusing on higher things and approaching his task with joy, Sisyphus takes control of the only thing he can—himself. This perspective transforms his seemingly meaningless task into a purposeful exercise in self-mastery and spiritual growth.

Knowledge and self-awareness do not solve all of life's mysteries or eliminate suffering, but it does acknowledge that tools and perspectives exist that enable individuals to confront life's uncertainties with courage, wisdom, and compassion.

I imagine Sisyphus is happy.

REFERENCES

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