

MASONIC MORALITY A VERY SPECIAL THEORY OF RELATIVITY

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THE PROBLEM

“Masonry is a system of morality...”, but what do we mean by Masonic morality, and if we can define it, how do we apply it. It was one thing for Max Plank, Neils Bohr and Albert Einstein to give us the theories about the atom; it was quite another for Enrico Fermi to split it.

In order to gain an understanding of “Masonic Morality” we must first reach an understanding of “morality”.

MORALITY IN GENERAL

Morality is a set of values. For most of us Masons raised in the United States, our values, and therefore our morality is written out for us in a book we keep open on the altar. We are self satisfied that all the morality we or anyone else could ever need is contained in that book we call a Bible.

Since morality reflects our values, we believe that there is but one morality and we see this morality as absolute. The very concept of morality demands that it be monolithic. After all, it is in the nature of any people to believe that their morality is what morality should be, because anything that does not reflect one’s values is regarded as immoral.¹

The problem we sometimes fail to grasp is that not everyone subscribes to the Bible. Fully 2/3 or more of the world’s population do not have Bibles, and how many who do really believe in them! Consequently, not everyone shares our concept of morality.

As an example of how easily morality can change, consider: amongst those who do have Bibles, there are Jews and Christians. We are all satisfied that the book we call Bible *is* morality. But beginning with the most elementary expression of belief, what happens when a Jew and a Christian enter a Synagogue or a Church? The Jew covers his head; the Christian uncovers his. Both act to show reverence for Deity. Both are saying the same thing, but while the value they are expressing - belief in omnipresence - is the same, their morality causes them to act in ways opposite to one another. This was just a simple example. We need not go into more complex problems of how men of good spiritual belief can differ in their means of expressing that belief.

¹ Indeed we have for years been grappling with a “buzzword” called prejudice. This word is tied to morality. Our current trend of humanistic thinking, indeed our masonic character teaches us to steer clear of prejudice. What we fail to realize is that no person can take pride in his own life style, his own personal philosophy of life, his own values, without necessarily being prejudiced; prejudiced in favor of what he believes and prejudiced against anything that is not what he believes. It is no accident that Jane Austen titled her book Pride and Prejudice. The concept of prejudice only becomes harmful when it is directed against a class indiscriminately without distinction as to what the class or the members of that class claim as its or their values.

On a quite different level, consider the moralities of nations. Some prize militarism, while others prize peace. Some are obedient to a single voice; in others each citizen is given a voice.

The point is that morality is not an absolute. It will vary with economics, politics, religion, social standing, geography and an host of other factors, too numerous to mention. Sometimes morality simply reflects expediency. If you live in a jungle, you have to kill to live. What is murder in times of peace may be heroism in times of war.

A MORE DEFINED PROBLEM

If then morality is not an absolute, is Masonic morality absolute? If two masons are given the same moral question, will they arrive at the same answer? If we are taught the same morality; if masonic morality is absolute, then the answer should be “yes”.

Let us first define Masonic morality, if that is possible. We sometimes see the term “Moral Law” crop up in our various writings and ritual. The duty to “obey the Moral Law” is the first landmark of a Worshipful Master. It is probably based on the assumption that Moral Law comes from the Bible. However, can we really expect the idea of a Moral Law to be viewed in the same way by all of masonry. If one mason believes that salvation is based on good deeds, and another believes it is based on belief in a savior, can we say that both men accept the same moral law, even if they share the same bible?. What if a mason reads only the Old Testament. Is he privy to the Moral Law? What is the Moral law to a Muslim?

As this writer sees it, and I can hardly claim to be the last word on the subject, Masonic Morality is the sum of all we we are taught in our ritual. If that definition makes sense, we had still better reconcile ourselves to recognizing that within our ritual there are direct quotes and borrowed concepts from both Jewish and Christian doctrine, and even writings by pagan authors².

Interestingly, some of what we take for granted to be Masonic morality is universal in origin and application, having no basis in Masonry. Before each obligation, we are told by the Master that there is no point in the obligation that will conflict with our duty to God, our Country, our Neighbor, or Ourselves. While Jefferson wrote of inalienable rights, Masonry recognizes these as universal duties, duties which are incorporated into Masonic morality.

If there is nothing in our obligations which will conflict with a man’s duty to God (as he perceives that duty through his chosen religion) then are all the precepts of masonry expected to be adopted by all men of all monotheistic religions? Does masonry admit that some of what it has to say will not sit well with all men? Is this introduction before each obligation a disclaimer, a red flag, that while we all go the same way as all others before us, yet we can take from Masonry what we will and disregard what our own philosophies of God, Country, Neighbor and Self do not adopt? Is Masonic Morality a personal morality or as an absolute, is it uniform?

² The description of earth, to which our ashes return, as the “kindest” of the four elements, has its origins in the writings of Pliny the Elder, who died while trying to escape Vesuvius in the year 79.

Having now given a definition (however brief, broad and probably controversial) of what constitutes Masonic morality, we need next to play it out in order to see whether it will resolve all moral questions in the same way.

MASONRY'S DILEMMA

One of the first lessons we learn in Masonry is that the institution appeals to men of every country, sect and opinion. We also know that Masonry is not a political institution. This second premise flows from the first. Masonry cannot be political because its constituency is too broadly based to be expected to follow any single ideology. If Masonry took a stand on any given issue, it would necessarily be in conflict with a part of its membership - every time. The institution could never survive. Every Grand Lodge election would have it party slogans and platforms on a scale that would dwarf the politics which we all know does not exist in Masonry!

Obviously Masonry does take a stand on some things. But when it does, it chooses problems of no political consequence. For instance, how controversial is Masonry when it supports "Just say no to drugs?" The drug dealers have no lobby. But what would happen within Masonry if its policy were "Just say no to tobacco!" It would split the organization.

Now here is where the dilemma comes in . What is politics? Politics is the machinery through which we decide questions of morality as a matter of public policy. For instance, adultery has been decriminalized in any number of states. It is still grounds for divorce, but it is no longer a crime. Adultery is certainly a moral issue. It goes to the sanctity of the family structure. Its prohibition protects the blood line. What we are seeing is that legislatures have decided that adultery is an offense against marriage, an offense at the level of the individual, and therefore it passed a law that gives the offended partner the right to terminate the marriage. However, the legislatures have also determined that, in light of the general decline in morality and prevalence of extramarital sexuality, adultery is no longer a crime against society. In short, the legislatures have made value judgments which they have reduced to the form of laws through the political process. They have expressed moral values in a blend of prohibition at the individual level and license at the societal level.

On a more familiar vein, the Commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is the law in every state of the Union, but it was a moral concept before it became a law.

So here is the dilemma. Masonry advocates morality, but lacks any form of political machinery to determine issues of morality. It is in this respect paralyzed by its inability to make decisions. It can only preach morality in the broadest sense, painting with the panoramic brush of the Bible, the Cecil B. DeMille Bible, without getting too specific. The following illustrates the dilemma in its practical consequences.

THE DILEMMA AT WORK

Two men kneel at the altar to become Entered Apprentice Masons. The man on the left is an MD with a specialty in OBGYN. He is a registered Democrat, a man of wealth, a man of some influence. The lodge is proud to have him as a member. This man holds to a political philosophy which in our "buzzword" culture is called "the right of a woman to choose". In short, he runs an

abortion clinic.

Next to him is an ordained minister; a registered Republican. He is not a man of means, but is highly respected in the community, and again the lodge is proud to have him as a member. He subscribes to both a political and religious philosophy which without any “buzzwords” we understand as “abortion is murder.” He sits on the board of directors of an adoption agency tied to his ministry.

Within five minutes these two prominent men will become masons. How, then, can Masonry accept them both? How can Masonry allow men of opposite moral beliefs to sit in the same lodge room. In short; **how can Masonry tell us to be moral, when Masonry cannot tell us what is moral!**

So Much for Absolutism

The answer is that Masonic morality is not an absolute. Both of the men in the example given above are moralists, in their own right. If the problem were simplified, if there were only one issue, the fetus, then both men would necessarily arrive at the same moral value. However, life does not present one dimensional problems. There is a second consideration in the problem, and that is the competing interests of the mother. Her interests include the economics of being a single parent, of the prospects of never attracting another mate when tied down with a child, or the risks to her health or even her life that carrying the fetus presents.

Moral values usually arise through the resolution of competing interests. As the strengths of those interests differ from person to person, so the resolution of those factors results differently from person to person. It is easier for a man to oppose abortion than for a woman.

In physics we calculate the trajectory of an object by the resolution of the forces exerted upon it; the direction of the object in a linear path as pushed by the propellant as against the downward force perpendicular to the center of the earth which we know of as the force of gravity. The resolution of those forces usually produces an arc that follows neither of the paths exerted directly upon it. Politics as the means of determining morality works in much the same way. The resolution of political forces is called compromise.

Masonry, likewise, is composed of men of different values, because we are men of different experiences. If masonry wanted its morality to be an absolute, it could not accommodate “men of every country, sect and opinion”. It could not accommodate speculative masons, because the presence of freethinking is always a challenge to absolutism. If anything, Masonry’s invitation to men difference creates the expectation that Masonry is a forum for conflicting values.

Masonic Morality is Relative to the Individual

The title of this paper is MASONIC MORALITY, A VERY SPECIAL THEORY OF RELATIVITY. Einstein taught us that the only absolute in the physical universe is the speed of light. In Masonry the only absolute is One God. From there on all of Masonic Morality depends on the individual or group interpreter. For example, belief in One God is fundamentally an agnostic idea. When we give God a name, ascribe attributes and Worship him, we have crossed

over to the realm of religion, which is beyond the scope of Masonry's dictates. Therefore, the name of any man's Deity, the powers and manifestations that man perceives in Deity, and the way he worships, all are based on the individual's view of Deity. Just like time, speed and distance in Einstein's universe, all these properties of Deity are relative.

We all believe there is only one God, so we are all praying to the same God. Every man believes his own religion to be divinely inspired, through the medium of his prophet (which in the case of the big three monotheistic religion is Moses, Jesus or Mohammed). Every man believes he has received the true message from the true prophet, which goes to the heart of why we all believe that morality is absolute, as long as it is our version of morality. But when we see the forest for the trees, we tend to realize that if all religions cannot be correct in their description of Deity, then at least one of us has created Deity to suit his own definition. We do all pray to the same Deity. It is only our definition of Deity that may be wrong.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if when the Messiah arrives, men were judged by the sincerity of their beliefs rather than their blind adherence to the practices of their religion. Then the true believers in all religions rather than the hangers on to a "true religion" could find salvation. That would be a divine joke on all of us; if morality as applied to Deity were infinitely variable, rather than obsessed with the rigidity that has promoted so much slaughter in the name of God. What if we really were all His children, rather than having the vast majority of human life since the creation condemned to hell for not adopting the true religion. In short, Masonry affords each of us the right to view Deity and his relation to Him from his own position in the spiritual universe.

Now I do not want to sound like some new wave preacher. I am of course trained in the orthodoxy of my chosen religion. But then that is my point. It is after all, my chosen religion, and being from a minority, my views are not necessarily that of anyone else who may be reading this. When I sit in lodge with brothers who do not subscribe to my point of religious view, that view still exists, as does theirs. When lodge is open, we meet on the level and are not concerned with our differences. But when lodge closes and we again clothe ourselves with our differing views, we are each left with the question of religion as to who is the true believer and who is the heretic. Masonry does not resolve that question.

The same idea prevails in any test of morality. Each of us must be at least 21 years of age before becoming a mason. Why? So that we can first develop as human beings; develop a concept of Deity; get a job to become charitable; mature enough to appreciate what the degrees are talking about. But we all grow up differently and view the world through different eyes, from different points on the surface of the earth.

The abortionist is taken by the sufferings of his patient, the woman. The minister is taken by the affects on the souls of both the woman and the doctor, along with the deprivation of life to the fetus. Somewhere along the line, enough people line up on one side of the problem or the other to reflect society's moral view. When the sides are evenly spaced, the value cannot be reduced to a societal moral and conflict prevails.

So What is Masonic Morality?

Our ritual contains its own Commandments. Thou shall help aid and assist. Thou shall not violate. However, such Commandments are very few. For the most part we are expected to apply concepts rather than precepts in making moral choices. In the end, with the exception of those few “Commandments” to be found in the obligations, Masonic Morality is not a set of preset laws, but instead it is an approach to moral problem solving.

Masonry’s use of tools as moral metaphors is closer to the mark than we might realize. The lessons we are taught in Masonry are themselves tools to be applied to each problem we encounter. If we can approach each moral dilemma by asking whether it promotes or detracts from brotherly love, relief and truth, with a mind that we all exist under the umbrella of our concept of what Deity wants from us, then we have found Masonic Morality. The results from individual to individual will ultimately differ, and conflict is inevitable, but in the end “to thine own self be true” is the ultimate test of Masonic morality.