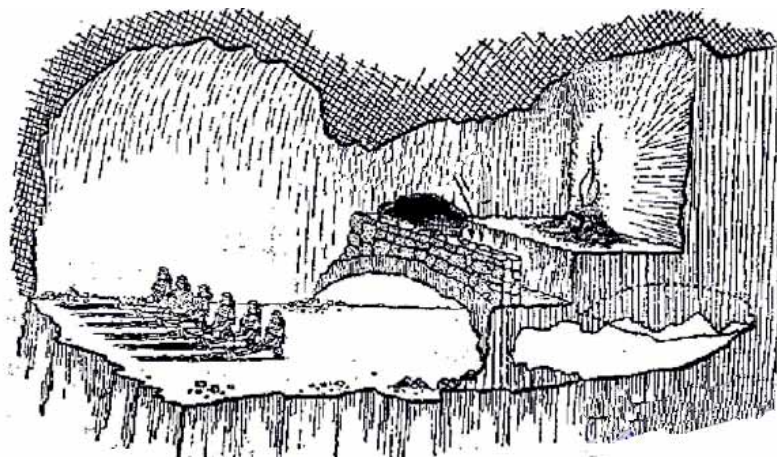


PARALLELS OF FREEMASONRY AND PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE



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Throughout history there have been many men who have attained a stature of high regard in the halls of Freemasonry. These men were usually individuals who added great triumphs to the world about them whether it be socially, academically, philosophically, or masonically. Each of these men may not have been raised in the Order but are believed to have been prepared and made a Mason in his heart. These are men who embraced the enlightenment thought either with or without the guidance of the Craft. One such man is the great philosophical teacher Plato. In the writings of Brother Albert Pike, Plato's time honored teachings are alluded to repeatedly. Some Masonic authors even attribute a veiled lineage to the philosophical academies of Plato's time. Of all his writings, there is at least one lesson from this great educator's repertoire that has parallels with the system of Freemasonry. Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* should have great Masonic resonance for all who have been inducted into the roll of the Craft.

Before undertaking the task of exploring the parallels between Freemasonry and Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, it is prudent to examine what, if any, connection Plato has with the Craft and its development. First and foremost, it is important to assert, at the onset of this exploration, that there will be no claim that Plato was inducted into the mysteries of Freemasonry or that it traces its lineage from his, or any other, ancient mystery school. This examination will only look at what the shapers and formers of modern Freemasonry thought about and gleaned from Plato's writings and example. Any obvious connections can be drawn between Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* and the modern institution of Free and Accepted Masonry will also be reviewed.

Plato's Life and Academy

Although there is some debate as to the date of Plato's birth, it is generally accepted that he was born around the year 428 BC (Guthrie, 1979). His given name was Aristocles. The name *Plato* was seemingly a nickname meaning broad, perhaps in reference to his physical

appearance. Plato's early life is blurred by antiquity and unreliable accounts. His immediate family, while politically connected and affluent, was not overly impressive, and Plato most likely lived an early life of little difficulty (Guthrie).



Plato was a student of the acclaimed teacher Socrates. This relationship was very impressing upon the life and personal views of Plato. Perhaps the most influential experience in Plato's life was the death of his revered teacher. According to Nails (2002), Plato was twenty-eight when Socrates was condemn to death by drinking the notorious hemlock. Following Socrates' death, Plato left Athens and traveled to Megara, Cyrene, Italy, Sicily, and Egypt (McEvoy, 1984). It is during this time of travel that, according to Wilmhurst (1922), Plato sought initiation into the Egyptian Mysteries but was rejected by the high priest. "*You Greeks are but children* in the Secret Doctrine" Sais, the priest, was reported to have replied to Plato's requests to being inducted into the mysteries. The ancients, according to tradition, did instruct Plato in the sacred and spiritual doctrines, and he was advanced in knowledge and understanding of the ancient mysteries.

Following his travels and intellectual search for light, Plato returned to Athens around the age of forty, and he established a school, the Academy, in the Grove of Academus (Cairn, 1961). Plato's school was geographically located within a grove or a public park filled with gymnasiums, alters, statues, and temples. Plato's Academy most probably was a loose connection of men who came to learn criticism of method by listening to his dialogues and instruction. The leader or head of the Academy was apparently elected for life by the majority vote of its members. Plato remained the Head of the Academy until his death in 348/347 BC. It

was in the Academy that Plato instructed some of the greatest intellectual minds of Western Civilization, including Aristotle.

Ancient and Masonic Writers and Plato

The Illustrious Brother Albert Pike, who incidentally was called by some the “Plato of Freemasonry,” held the teachings of Plato in high esteem (Hall, 2006). In *Morals and Dogma*, Pike (1956) reveals his position that Plato is among the greatest revelers of truth and light. Pike stated that Plato expounded and expressed the noble doctrine of nature “in the most beautiful and luminous manner” (p. 617).

Wilmschurst (1922) refers to Plato in his revered work *The Meaning of Masonry*. Wilmschurst stated that in order to fully understand the Fellow Craft Degree, a student of Freemasonry must study two ancient sources. The first of these is Plato’s *Dialogues*. “The other is the records of the classical Christian contemplatives” (p. 123). Of interest is Wilmschurst’s reminder to the reader that Plato refers to the four cardinal virtues in *Phædo* and the *Book of Wisdom*, ch. viii, 5-7. If the studying Mason researches this point, he will not find the traditional Masonic virtues of fortitude, prudence, temperance, and justice. Instead he would find justice, temperance, wisdom, and courage.

Mackey (1882) in *The Symbolism of Freemasonry* stated, “And Plato says that the design of initiation was to restore the soul to that state of perfection from which it had originally fallen”. This being taken from the *Phædo*, it is evident the general esoteric goal of both the ancient mysteries and modern Freemasonry are similar in concept.

The Dionysian Artificers refers to Plato numerous times. The work points out the importance of understanding that fables and allegories often contain numerous meanings (De Costa, 1936). It further asserted that Plato’s teaching of “the descent of the soul into the

darkness; of the body, the perils of the passions, [and] the torments of vices” are shared by Virgil and illustrated in writings (p. 22). Of these, the descent of the soul into the darkness is relevant to the topic at hand. Fakhry (2004) connects the *Allegory of the Cave* and Ibn Sina’s *Allegory of the Bird*. Fakhry asserted that both illustrate the destiny of the soul to only be released from bondage through an attainment of knowledge. It is recommended that all seek out and study the *Allegory of the Bird*. It has meaning and purpose to all men, but without a doubt it has great importance and is worthy of examination by those who are called seekers of light.

The Allegory of the Cave

In Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, human prisoners are held captive deep in the earth. Their necks and ankles chained, they have never seen the outside world, the sun, or each other. They are bound facing a stone wall. Light from the outside world shines in the cave casting shadows on the stone wall each prisoner is facing. Also behind the captives is a fire, and in front of the fire a walkway on which men carry puppets and items from the outside world. These items include statues of gods, men, animals, and trees. The bondsmen have no understanding of their condition: their world is made up only of the illusions of distorted shadows cast upon the stone wall before them. The sounds and voices heard by those kept enslaved are only echoes and reverberations from the outside. As they sit in darkness, their reality is limited and their morals only based on their own understandings of distorted truths and skewed sounds from the outside world.

The allegory continues to explain that the prisoners cling to their own prejudices and self-conceived notions of reality. Plato asserts that if all the prisoners were released to turn and see the elements that created their reality, the prisoners would be blinded by the light of the fire. The prisoners, according to Plato, would quickly become angered by what they viewed and desire to

return to their shackled condition. However, Plato suggests that if only one prisoner had his chains removed, the response would be vastly different. The prisoner would turn to see the fire, the walk way, and the other prisoners bound in a blind state. The allegory continues with the prisoner being dragged out of the cave by an agent and presented to the sunlit outside world. There he sees that the realities and morals of his world are only an illusion of the world about him. Without any argument, it may be asserted that Plato believed a return to the cave would be almost impossible because the prisoner would have seen his previously darkened condition as an enslaved state.

An Initial Examination

In the centuries between Plato's first oration of the afore described allegory and today, there have been countless numbers of interpretations of its meaning. Nearly every civilized culture and society has examined and synthesized the allegory to extract meaning and support to their lives. It is this allegory's ability to be interpreted in varied ways that makes it such a fundamental and enduring legacy of the thoughts and teachings of Plato. Why then should it not be appropriate to ascertain a Masonic interpretation of Plato's Allegory of the Cave?

The allegory's first element of Masonic resonance of the allegory is its ability to be interpreted in varied ways. Just as it is asserted that the allegory's ability to be varied in interpretation has added to its popularity and survival, the same may be said of Freemasonry. No institution which is austere, unbending, and disobliging can have a true global existence, spanning geographic, religious, political, and cultural boundaries. It is the ability of Freemasonry to meet the needs of men from all creeds and walks of life that has led to its survival over the centuries. Without this ability to be relevant to Christians, Muslims, Jews,

Buddhists, and Deists alike both the allegory of the Cave and Freemasonry would either be isolated or lost in the ages of time.

In *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*, Dr. T. Z. Lavine (1984) of George Washington University, describes the allegory in such a way that one could use the same sentences to describe the Craft itself. “It is an allegory of our time as needing to be born again, to emerge from the darkness of corruption into the light of truth and morality. It is an educational allegory of our time as needing to ascend through stages of education from the darkness of intellectual and moral confusion in its everyday beliefs, to the light of true knowledge and values” (p. 28). Freemasonry hopes to lead its initiates to higher understandings of truth and life to put away the dim light of superstition and passion to embrace the illumination of reason, intellectual knowledge, and immutable values. Dr. Lavine’s brief interpretations of the allegory provide a Masonic aura and a spring board for its analysis.

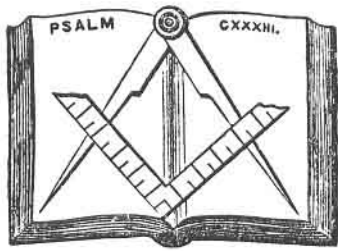
Both Freemasonry and Plato’s allegory begin with men in a darkened condition. The men in the cave are groping in darkness and bound to the blighted beliefs of superstition and self-prescribed truths. It is note worthy to point out that the allegory takes place within a cave. Caverns have long been considered, masonically, to be “a symbol of the darkness of ignorance and crime impenetrable to the light of truth” (Mackey, 1927, p. 169). In the Ninth degree of the Scottish Rite, “the cave is a symbol of the imprisonment of the human soul and intellect by ignorance, superstition, deceit, and fraud” (Hutchens, 2000). The neophyte, who has petitioned Freemasonry, is held in the bondage of ignorance just as the mass of mankind is held in ignorance to the great and true teachings of the Craft. “There disinterestedness vanishes, every one howls, searches, gropes, and gnaws for himself. Ideas are ignored, and of progress there is no thought” (Pike, 1956, p. 3). Just as the profane is satisfied by the broken image of himself, so

are the individuals in the cave content with living in darkness without any hope of intellectual growth or true fulfillment. It is also noteworthy to point out that the three ruffians, in the Ninth degree, are found hiding in a cave. Where else do ignorance, tyranny, and fanaticism belong?

In his allegory, Plato presents with a very interesting assertion. He presents an occurrence where all the prisoners are released to turn and see the images within the cave. As they view the darkness around them, their eyes are not able to adjust to the protruding and offensive brightness of the fire's light. They quickly become disillusioned and repulsed by the image and desire to return to their once darkened condition. Does this image not hold great Masonic meaning? The totality of the prisoners represents the mass of mankind. Brother Pike (1956) in *Morals and Dogma* states "people, as a mass, (are) rude and unorganized" (p. 6). Mankind, as an innate passion, loves squalor and ignorance. It is only through the instruction of an agent, such as Freemasonry, that the individual, not the mass, can be raised above his inborn breeding and grow intellectually. All men are not suited for the secret teachings of the Craft. They are unable to grasp its rich meaning and hidden gems of purpose. It is only the few, the minority of intellectually prone individuals, who can be lifted up from the mire of mankind's filth to be bettered by the teachings of the Craft. The mass would be unable to perceive the teachings of the allegories of Masonry and would quickly be blinded and wish to return to their previous status in life. As the Hebrew proverb states, "As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly."

Freemasonry has always known that the masses are not compatible with its teachings; therefore, it has only admitted the best and most lofty individuals of society to attain the progressive instruction it has to offer. The degrees of the Craft are only represented within Plato's allegory when considering the individual, just as only one man should be introduced to

the mysteries of Masonry at a time. Within the lodge, the uninitiated is hoodwinked and blinded to the occurrences about him. He is kept in darkness for two reasons. The first reason is a

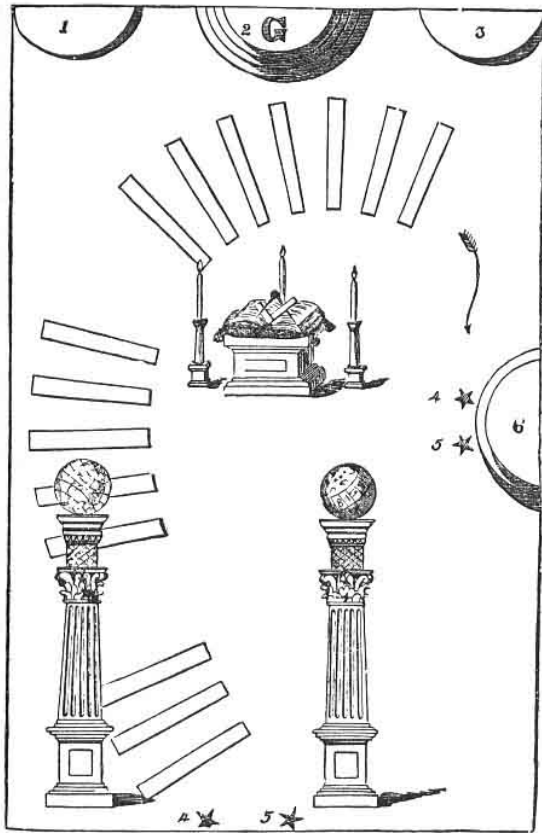


reminder of the vow of secrecy soon to be taken. Secondly, it is intended that the candidate for the Entered Apprentice Degree, and all others, perceive the forms of the lodge in his heart before he views the beauties thereof with his eyes. The individual in

Plato's allegory is kept in darkness to reality. During this time, he uses shadows and distorted noises to conceive the reality that is around him, and the proselyte is not brought to light until after his cable tow has been removed. In the allegory, the prisoner is not brought to light until his shackles are opened. The agent who brings him to initial light walks him around the cave and points to objects and demands the individual to name them (Plato). The parallel exists that neither the individual released from bondage nor the newly made brother within the lodge are brought to complete light. The teachings of both are only partial. The two initiates are allowed to adjust to the new light that has been shown them and expected to progress through further stages to attain more light and greater understanding.

The next development in the journey of a man seeking Masonic enlightenment occurs through the teachings and philosophy of the Fellow Craft's Degree. This second degree of Masonry is filled with great and enduring ideas and teachings for the neophyte seeking further light in the Craft. The legend of the winding staircase holds lessons of the utmost importance, and within its beautifully illustrated lessons lie one word that most suitably expresses its meaning. That single word is ascension. The passage taken to the Holy of Holies is sacred and dominated by the ascension of a winding staircase. This winding staircase is symbolic of the journey of one seeking a liberal education (Mackey, 1927). Mackey explains, "the path of the

Fellow Craft requires him to ascend, step by step, until he has reached the summit, where the treasures of knowledge await him” (p. 1007). Education is the great equalizer and is the one



thing that a man can do to elevate himself above others. H. L. Haywood (1922) stresses the second degree’s importance in elevating men intellectually. All men who seek elevation are destined to ascend the enlightened path of knowledge. Education and academics are the paths by which Masonry teaches one must take to truly find enlightenment. The experience of the freedman, within Plato’s allegory, being dragged from the darkness of the cave can be compared to the winding staircase of the second degree. It is through this ascending passage that he finds the most brilliant light. The contradiction

between the allegory and the second degree is the fact that the individual in the allegory is “reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent” (Plato). Freemasonry never forces itself upon initiates. It is through one’s own freewill and accord that an individual is exposed to the teachings of the Craft.

“When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities” (Plato). This passage is true for both the allegory and the newly passed Fellow Craft. In each degree of Freemasonry, the brilliant light to which the candidate is exposed is so bright he at first is blinded by it. It might be prescribed that for this reason a period of at least twenty-eight days, in most jurisdictions, and a lecture are required

before advancement might be made. This allotted time allows maturation of and ample reflection upon the seeds sewn within the lessons of the degree (Driber, 2004).

It is through the maturation of a candidate spiritually and intellectually, his listening to the instruction of well informed brethren, and the reflection upon the lessons taught him that a man is prepared to experience the life changing episode of the Third Degree of Masonry. Only after a candidate has first been brought to light and shown the initial beauties of the lodge and passed through the ascension of growth intellectually that a man can be raised to the newness of life as a Master Mason. The same journey, symbolically and allegorically, had to occur to the



released prisoner. He had to first be brought to the understanding that he was in a state of bondage. After which, he was caused to pass through the ascension of knowledge to seek the bright light at the pinnacle of the summit. It is at this summit that the freedman is truly brought to full illumination and entitled to freely see the realities of the world about him.

“First he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day? Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is” (Plato). Through the lessons of the Third Degree a man is shown his place in the world as an immortal being destined to be resurrected by the ultimate Creator. The teachings of the Third Degree are explained to the newly raised brother; however, the truer and deeper realities and meanings of the degree are much later discovered, if ever. The freed prisoner in Plato’s allegory is able to view all the glories of the real world once he has completed

his ascent from the cave; so as, the Master Mason is entitled and does receive a full explanation of the mysteries of Craft Masonry. Neither individual is at once able to comprehend the beauties he is caused to behold. It is through the reflection and consistent study upon what is seen and experienced that the true lessons are learned by both.

Other Writers' Parallels

Fanthrope and Fanthorpe (2006) stated that the *Allegory of the Cave* illustrates “the significance of free and independent thought as a *pathway to truth*” (p.110). They continued to state that the prisoner who first escaped “from the cave of deceptive shadows and discovered reality is someone who has learned Masonic truth” (p. 110). According to the authors, Plato taught the things we see, touch, smell, and hear are not reality. They assert that Plato believed that all that we perceive with our senses must be elevated through the mind before true understanding can occur. It was, according to Plato, the role of the philosopher to help others release the light within his students to allow them to understand the world around them through a stimulated mind. Fanthrope and Fanthorpe allude to the conclusion that this goal is shared with Freemasonry.

Conclusions

It is not suggested that the intent of The Allegory of the Cave was meant to be an illustration of Freemasonry. The absurdity of such an assertion would be a gross injustice to the honor of the fraternity. It is also acknowledged that many works of literature and philosophy could be stretched to illustrate some Masonic teaching. It is hoped, those who read this will find it Masonically enlightening rather than a mere stretch of Masonic thought. The thought Plato tried to impart through his allegory clearly parallels the high teachings of the Craft. It is only natural for an institution defined as “a peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and

illustrated by symbols” to be interested in the parallels of those great minds who so effectively used allegories as tools of instruction. We are taught in the Second Degree of Freemasonry to cultivate the Arts and to grow in usefulness. This can only be achieved through consistent and intense reflection upon the Craft, and by paralleling and searching the philosophies and ideals that so closely resemble the morals of the Craft. May the Order of Freemasonry be as enduring as the teachings of the great philosopher Plato.

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