

Freemasonry and social responsibility

This is an abbreviated version of the 2019 Rectitude Essay, prepared for publication with the permission of the Lodge of Rectitude, No. 335. The Essay was originally delivered in lodge on 20th May, W. Bro. Michael Jakins SLGR, Master.

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Politics is holding societal or organisational views, gaining power and sufficient compliance to implement them. In its highest sense, as Gladstone said, it is nation building. In its lowest, it is chicanery. Modern Freemasonry began in the Enlightenment, the rise of reason. Isaac Newton was its prime representative and a member of his inner circle was John Theophilus Desaguliers, third Grand Master. Reason is thus our birthright, and it is to reason, not politics that this essay appeals.

There are periodic intervals in human experience when the moral life comes under threat. Now is such a time, and if we take our ritual to heart, it falls to us to resist. The threat is best summed up by Ivan Boesky and his motto, *Greed is good*. It is said that Boesky wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the words, *He who has the most when he dies, wins* — a yardstick no doubt shared by the bankers who caused the 2007/8 financial crisis. Of them, Simon English wrote:

The unofficial offer from the bank that employs the traders is this: Here are a series of rules we take very seriously. Try to get around them without getting caught. If you make a bundle, we'll give you a slice. If you lose, well, that's unauthorised dealing. Best of luck.

Greed is one of the seven deadly sins. The souls tormented in Dante's fourth circle of hell, learn that they cannot purchase rest, not with *all the gold beneath the moon*. St Thomas Aquinas said of greed:

It is a sin directly against one's neighbour, since one man cannot over-abound in external riches without another man lacking them, for temporal goods cannot be possessed by many at the same time.

Would Ivan Boesky and the bank traders be brought up short by the saint's words? I fear they would not give a damn, to use an appropriate pun. For them, the fact that *temporal goods cannot be possessed by many at the same time*, was just the point.

Greed has now become an everyday sin. Members of Parliament deceive voters. Accountants contravene their professional ethics; newspapers lie; car manufacturers cheat emissions tests and airplane manufacturers sell safety features as optional extras. A common tactic for sporting organisations is bribery, while companies game their locations to avoid tax. One in five vanilla ice-creams contain no milk, no cream and no vanilla. Asked to justify themselves, culprits will tell you to get real. Only weaklings are troubled by morality and only little people pay taxes. After all, if you shave your head and drive a Range Rover, you are entitled to ignore red lights.

You will have heard of the *social contract*, an agreement by everyone to obey the rules for the benefit of society as a whole. Without such a contract, as Thomas Hobbes said in 1651:

... there is no place for industry because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building, no knowledge, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society.

and in his famous phrase:

... the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

In everyday life, it is trust that governs relationships. We do not enter into a legal agreement with a baby sitter when we go to the pictures. We do not exact an IOU when lending a brother a fiver for

the charity gavel, nor photograph the clothes we take to the dry cleaners but, according to the annual Edelman Trust Barometer, trust is now at an all time low. Jonathan Sacks wrote:

Relationships, at work or in private life, have become a choice between manipulating and being manipulated, exploiting or being exploited. The idea that one might value another person or an institution sufficiently to make a long-term binding commitment begins to seem old-fashioned and naïve. There is no relationship so intimate, no secret so private, that it cannot be confessed in front of television cameras or sold for money to the press. It [is] hard today to find a code of honour that cannot be broken for profit.

To replace lost trust, successive governments have legislated more and more, but law is expensive, cumbersome and often no remedy. We may sue a delivery service when a wedding dress arrives late, but a financial penalty yields no solace to a bride who cannot look her best.

The cause is an absence of morality in common, surprising in a country which boasts a Christian tradition. As our ritual says:

As a Freemason, I would first recommend to your most serious contemplation the VSL, charging you to consider it the unerring standard of truth and justice and to regulate your actions by the Divine precepts it contains.

But it doesn't really work, does it? Consider the failure to resolve the issues of contraception, abortion, assisted dying, stem cells, blood transfusions, LGBT lifestyles, and women bishops. The *Working Tools* in the second tell us that the purpose of morality is to get us to heaven

... by square conduct, level steps and upright intentions, we hope to ascend to those blessed mansions whence all goodness emanates.

Yet in the UK 50% have no religion; 60% never pray; 80% never attend church, even at Christmas. What then is the purpose of life? Aristotle described it as *eudaimonia*, the attainment of well-being and happiness. Our phrase *live respected and die regretted* comes close to what he meant. It is an evaluation of a life by its virtues. The Christian life is evaluated by St Paul's fruit of the spirit:

Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance.

In Aristotle's own time (384-322 BCE), the required virtues were very different. They included:

<i>Liberality</i>	using money in an estimable way; generosity with style.
<i>Magnificence</i>	impressive expenditure, perhaps paying for a new warship or temple.
<i>Graciousness</i>	being charming and charismatic, hosting impressive events.

To exhibit these virtues a man had to be successful and wealthy, qualities incompatible with Christianity, for:

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

The Norse or Viking society called for yet other virtues: skill of arms and courage of course, but since death was always victorious, the most significant virtue was making a good end. The purpose of the warrior's life was to live it as a *saga*, and the tales of those who *lived respected and died regretted* were told around the camp fire.

What then are the virtues leading to a respected life and regretted death today? It seems that we have none in common, merely the echoes of outmoded cultures like liberalism and capitalism.

Liberalism called for open-mindedness, taking responsibility for one's actions, being considerate to others, fairness and helping the underdog, but in place of open-mindedness today we find fundamentalism; in place of responsibility, selfishness; in place of consideration, greed; and help for

the underdog is replaced by the excuse of trickle down.

Capitalism required fair and honest competition, a sense of decency, a legal system to enforce contracts and protect workers' rights, and the separation of economic from political power. But today monopolies abound. My word is no longer my bond and cheating is rife. Civil servants who rule on commercial issues are recruited by the companies they rule upon. Lobbyists are over-powerful, unions disenfranchised and multi-nationals place themselves beyond national law.

Saint Benedict set out his famous Rule in about 530 CE, another time when the moral life was under threat. To become a Benedictine implies the choice to obey the Rule of St Benedict. Making that choice is what being a Benedictine means. It would be nonsense for a postulant to decline the Rule but still claim to be a Benedictine. In a like manner, to become a Freemason implies adopting our values. It is what being a Freemasons means. It is nonsense to decline our values while claiming to be a Freemason. We all receive this charge:

Duty, honour, and gratitude now bind you to be faithful to every trust; to support with becoming dignity your new character and to enforce, by example and precept, the tenets of the system. Therefore let no motive cause you to swerve from your duty, violate your vows, or betray your trust ...

What is the purpose of Freemasonry? Think of us as an Alcoholics Anonymous for morality. AA is concerned with the personal recovery and continued sobriety of those who turn to it. Freemasonry is concerned with the recovery and continued maintenance of the moral life among those who seek its mysteries. Alcoholics Anonymous works through its meetings. Attendance matters. Sobriety cannot be regained and maintained on one's own. Freemasonry works through its meetings and regular attendance matters. The moral life cannot be regained and maintained on one's own.

The purpose of Alcoholics Anonymous is clear, but the masonic life is less easy to understand, if only because outsiders are looking for tangible, financial or extrinsic benefits of membership. They argue that Freemasonry *must* be a mutual benefit club, that it *must* be a way to get on. When we deny this, people are mystified and ask, *Why do you do it then?*

There are extrinsic benefits. We cherish the alchemy of Freemasonry whereby an ordinary chap is turned into the master of the lodge, able to run a meeting, make a speech, deliver the ritual, and handle such words as *acquiescence*, *corporeal*, *immemorial* and even *parallelopipedon*. That ability does have value in ordinary life — but the real values of Freemasonry are not the external advantages of rank and fortune.

When a shy brother blossoms, we find it *wonderful*. Ritual done well is an act of *love*, a *gift* to the candidate and the lodge. When a lodge helps out a brother in need, it does so because it *cares*. The *wonder*, the *gift*, the *love* and the *care* are intrinsic values. They have no fiscal value but nonetheless represent the very centre of our circle. Unique in modern life, Freemasonry offers every man a purpose: to live respected and die regretted, to provide a bastion for the moral life, a reservoir of trust, the world around. When visiting lodges in Cuba recently, I was delighted to be greeted with all five points of fellowship, ending with a hug.

However, our ritual makes it clear that our love is not for our brethren alone. At our initiation, each of us was charged with duty owed to our neighbour:

... by acting with him on the square, by rendering him every kind office that justice or mercy may require, by relieving his necessities, soothing his afflictions ...

and the *Long Closing* declares:

Let me impress upon your minds, and may it be instilled into your hearts, that every human creature has a just claim on your kind offices. I therefore trust that you will be good to all.

Good to all?

In 1998, the average Footsie 100 chief executive pay was 47 times that of the average worker. Today it is 145 times. Britain is the sixth largest economy in the world but food banks have become a permanent feature of our society. A record 1.6 million food parcels were given out by Trussell Trust food banks last year, the busiest in the charity's history. One in five Britons live in poverty, five million of them children. 60% of families seeking help from food banks have one or both parents in work. NHS employees form the largest single group.

These people are not shirkers. They simply do not earn enough to make ends meet. Benefits fraud is an insignificant proportion of benefits spend, costing the same as administrative errors. Corporate scrounging costs much more. The government spends £11 billion a year subsidising low wages paid by some of our most profitable businesses.

Over a third of the income of poor families goes on food. According to the British Medical Journal, reliance on cheap foods — high in fat, sugar, and salt — has caused the return of rickets in children, with the bowed legs, abnormally curved spine, and bone pain it brings. The 2019 tax and benefit changes gifted £280 extra to the richest households, and took £100 away from the poorest.

Pseudo self-employment denies workers holidays, pensions and sick pay. Management bullying forces unpaid overtime. In one call centre, workers have to take a wooden spoon with them when they go to the loo. No-one else can go until the spoon is returned.

If every human creature has a *just claim on our kind offices*, then we have a responsibility to combat such barbarism. We give to charity each year but that only goes so far, and charity all too often lets governments and employers off the hook. Social responsibility lies in attacking the roots of poverty.

While the barbarians may be beyond our control, they are not beyond our influence. We can make the voice of morality heard. We can argue for a caring society, one that supports people down on their luck and helps them get up again; bestows dignity on the disabled rather than guilt; shames bad management, shines a spotlight on the dark sin of greed, and uses reason to demonstrate the economic illiteracy of austerity. Disraeli first, and later Macmillan, referred to this as one-nation toryism, arguing that unless the rich aid the poor, social unrest will result. It has been said that the Brexit vote was evidence of such unrest.

Our fellow creatures include the young and yet unborn, so the future of the planet must be our concern. Mammals, birds, amphibians, insects, plants, marine life, terrestrial life are disappearing at an increasing rate. A small but horrifying sign of global warming is in the bodies emerging from thinning ice on Everest. A larger sign is Greenland's ice sheet. It is two miles thick. If it melts, sea levels will rise 24 feet, and it is melting four times faster today than 15 years ago.

We must really state what we stand for, taking a lesson from Corinthians:

... if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself unto the battle?

We have too long been defensive, seeking to persuade the public that Freemasonry is not important, nothing to worry about, not serious, as if we roll up our trouser legs for a laugh. Freemasonry isn't a hobby. It really isn't. It is a way of life and a moral practice, as the ritual says:

Forcibly impress upon [your brethren] the dignity and high importance of Freemasonry ... Charge them to practise, out of the lodge, those excellent precepts they are taught within it ... so that, when a man is said to be a Freemason, the world may know that he is one to whom the burdened heart may pour forth its sorrow, to whom the distressed may prefer their suit, whose hand is guided by justice, and whose heart is expanded by benevolence.

It falls to us, one of the few surviving moral communities, to resist the threat to the moral life.

May Freemasonry flourish in every part of the world and become influential in diffusing the light of wisdom, aiding the strength of reason, dispensing the practice of virtue and lessening the aggregate of human misery and vice ... Firm in rectitude ... may it remain until time shall be no more, a perfect monument of wisdom, strength and beauty which age cannot obliterate nor adversity decay.