

# **Being Free**

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We call ourselves 'Freemasons'. In what are we free? What does it mean to be free? What is 'Freedom'? Is it only the lack of chains or restrictions, or is it being able to do whatever we please? After all, we do know that every social framework we belong to limits us to some extent; that the freedom of each one of us is limited so as not to trespass the freedom of our fellow men.

Quite apart from understanding the meaning of this term, we should examine the importance of being free and why, as Masons, we insist that candidates are free men and that they come of their own free will and accord.

Lastly, we should consider if by being obligated we diminish our own freedom.

We say that Freemasonry is "a peculiar system of morality" In my humble opinion this is the crux of the matter. Why? Because morality cannot exist without full freedom. This means that freedom is a precondition sine qua non for being a member in a group based on morality.

The measure of freedom with which a new brother comes to us is important not only from an overt reason: that he came of his free will and accord. The more important aspect lies in the inner meaning of "being a Freemason": the man's basic attitude; his being free from prejudices and ready to judge with honesty and an open mind, as well as readiness to defend his views even when he is in minority, or worse still, when he is in danger for defending his principles. I suppose this idea is familiar to every MM.

Let us go back to morality and to moral behavior. In my opinion, to be moral, to behave according to moral principles, depends on a tendency and an ability to examine and discern between what's right and what's wrong, between what conforms to accepted norms of justice and honesty and what does not. It is my contention that a person's morality depends on two preconditions: that there exists a choice between alternatives and that this choice is made freely and without coercion.

Why are these two conditions so necessary? When there is no choosing between possible alternatives one cannot say that there was an actual moral choice made. Without choosing between alternatives we cannot say whether this man is moral or immoral. His moral attitude has not manifested itself in a positive act. On the other hand, if a choice is made under duress, I'm sure you'll agree with me that such a choice is absolutely worthless as far as morality is concerned.

A moral judgment is manifested only when a free choice between alternatives was made and that the alternative chosen is that which conforms to what is regarded as normative. In a round about way this also implies the norms existing at that time and place in that society. The factors of time and place are important because moral values change in time and it would be unjust to pass moral judgment without taking into account the norms existing at that time and place. For instance: ownership of slaves was a normative behavior but has become regarded as unjust and immoral. A slave owner cannot be judged with our present day standards. We

may regard slavery as immoral but we should not judge the slave-owner of the past by our present day standards.

Let us divert our attention to an additional point of view. The principles of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality always appear together. Is it a coincidence? Can equality exist when an unequal measure of freedom or of rights exists? I am not sure that we bear in our minds that equality of rights cannot exist without limitations on the freedoms of all the individuals, so that **all** men are on the level with regard to **their** freedom.

I hope we agree, that it is not in vain that our principles of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality are always tied together, yet I wonder if all agree with me that a condition of true freedom and liberty is a permanent condition of walking on a razor's edge. We cannot define the limits of liberty once and for all. We have constantly to check and recheck whether we have trespassed our bounds into those of our neighbor; always asking ourselves whether we have unduly used our power or riches in a manner which diminishes the equal rights of our fellow men. Have I used coercion of any kind? After all, any measure of liberty granted to me as a right, has absolutely no significance as long as I am prohibited from actually exercising that right of mine, or does it?

Moreover, we have already seen that freedom is a basic prerequisite for making a moral choice, and I have also remarked that we expect brethren to be free from prejudices and from stands which are not based on constant moral self-scrutiny. We expect them to exercise their freedom whenever they are called to take a stand. It is my view, that this demand of ours is also an absolute condition for being a member in a democratic society. I do not mean only 'Freedom' as opposed to coercion, but not less as a natural constant inclination to always examine issues without bias or prejudices. Democracy is not only a system of government. It is a way of life, which is based on moral behavior and on a constant self-checking of each one's measure of freedom, as compared with that of his fellow men. Of awareness to the very delicate balance between rights and duties both my own as well as those of others and that of society as a whole. It requires a constant self-limiting of our freedom because we recognize the equal right of our fellow men to their freedom. It is based on free debate being ensured without fear of pronouncing one's ideas. It is based on the majority recognizing the rights of a minority to stick to its' stands In other words: to be a true Freemason also means adhering to moral principles based on the readiness to value every act of mine as well as my standpoint, both as a person as well as a member in our Craft. If you want, to be a Freemason is tied with being a democrat.

Now, holding this view, can I remain apathetic when **any** minority tries to brake the rules of the democratic system? If we accept that the democratic way of life depends (a) on free choice made consciously and (b) on recognizing the need to limit our own freedom, we must conclude that true democracy can exist only when all accept moral norms of behavior as the foundations of the system. What is permitted and what is prohibited, both in the manner in which things are done as well as in their inner meanings. As Freemasons, don't we have what to say whenever these rules are broken? We also believe in **equality**. So as Freemasons don't we have what to say on every and any form of inequality? Are only we as brethren equal? Our belief in equality and brotherly love surely leads us to react to **any** form of inequality, to any group being preferred over another; of any immoral act. **But** we

never take an active part as a group. As an Order we do not act in the public domain; each one of us should fight for justice, equality and freedom as a person.

Let me give two examples of what I mean. In the opening catechism of a lodge working the Schroeder ritual, the WM says: "I draw this sword for humanity and justice here and everywhere!" This is taking a very clear stand, isn't it? In the A&ASR the aims of Freemasonry are defined by the Orator in the following way: "Freemasonry is searching human happiness through tolerance, love, efforts towards justice and equality, fighting tyranny, ignorance and prejudices". This can hardly be considered as not taking a very clear stand.

Do I need to say more?

Even when we believe that each one of us is a product of his surroundings and the education he got - which limits a perfect freedom and, at least, taints one's attitudes - even when we believe that we can never completely free ourselves from these formative forces - we can rightly expect that a brother will freely and knowingly chisel his own corners so to come as close as he can to this ideal perfection we have set as our ideal. At least let us hope that we try our best to do so.

Before I conclude, I would like to raise a final point. I hope you will agree with me that "Freedom" has t w o meanings. Usually, we think of freedom in terms of free from limitations or restrictions. However, this seems to me to be the less important meaning. Why? What is more important: freedom **from** (bondage) or freedom **to** (act). Perhaps there is no significance in freedom from bondage if it doesn't lead us to freedom of action and of will?! What do you think?

Going back to my question right at the beginning: are we less free as a result of our being obligated? I very much hope that by now you will agree with me, that since we have chosen freely to undertake to obey certain moral principles, knowingly limiting somewhat our own freedom, it is a proof of our being truly free and truly moral.

Last but not least, I hope we agree that Masonry leads to a somewhat idealistic attitude and that we should always remain true to what we regard as the principles of our system of morality. No shame in that, is there?

I hope this leaves you with something to think of.