

What is the Purpose of the Masonic Fraternity Now and in the Future?

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Je ne parle pas français

In *Plato, Not Prozac* Canadian philosopher Lou Marinoff muses with his reader the difference between “meaning” and “purpose” painting the following illustration.¹ If one walks into a restaurant in Paris and don’t know any French, when given the menu, you wouldn’t understand it. Clearly, though, despite an inability to glean any meaning from the words on the menu, one must admit that its purpose is obvious, namely, to facilitate the selection of a great meal. This is to say that *purpose* has little to do with whether its reader makes sense of the menu.

Conversely, if one can read French but cannot afford to eat anything at the restaurant, the ability to construct menu-meaning does not automatically lead to having purpose. Furthermore, if one has never been in a restaurant and does not know French, the menu would have neither meaning or purpose to the potential customer.

According to Marinoff, meaning and purpose can also be confused. If one sits down at a French restaurant and picks up a knife and fork and begins to eat the menu,

the meaning of the menu has become the object which menus typically signify, namely, food.

I begin with this philosophical exercise to help clarify the question posed, *what is the purpose of Masonry, now and in the future?* Men petition Freemasonry for many reasons: education, social experiences, esoteric interests, affinity for our history, familial connections, etc., though some reasons could be quite arbitrary. But none of those reasons in and of themselves might be the *purpose* of Freemasonry, even if these might offer meaningfulness to many.

In other words, we can, like the menu at the French restaurant, discern a difference between meaning and purpose. Masonry *means* different things to different people. Even when Masons' individual life-purposes might appear to be contrary between one man and another sitting together in lodge, Freemasonry teaches men to not be contrarian. Individuals' constructions of meaning are at the very least recognized. We can agree to disagree.

Said directly: the purpose of Freemasonry, I argue, is to assist individuals in *practice of distinguishing meaning and purpose*. Freemasonry does not have a single defined object or tangible end that is ultimate or universal; rather it teaches the difference between meaning and purpose. Freemasonry's meaning and purpose are not directed at single objects or ends but instead philosophically operates as offering *structural* introspection upon one's life.

A Peculiar System of Morality?

Freemasonry is typically claims itself to be “a system of morality veiled in allegory”; *morality* itself might appear to be the purpose of Masonry. As such, Freemasonry is poised well to address a world devoid of morality and a human species addicted to immorality. While I believe this view of our world to be true, we must acknowledge that Freemasonry rarely offers primary moral instruction beyond basic social parameters about fraternal relationships. Beyond basic tenets of friendship, fairness, and attentive etiquette, Freemasonry offers no statements of what one ought or should do. I believe that to make the case for Freemasonry holding morality as a meaning or purpose is misleading or even an equivocation based upon what exactly one means by either “morality” or “Freemasonry.”

Yet this is not to say that Freemasonry is unconcerned with morality. Instead, I suggest that Freemasonry provides a philosophical *structure*—and with it, mythic narratives—which unlock, redefine, or enhance more direct systems of morality. Morality may be undefined, but it underlies nearly every aspect of the human life to which Freemasonry points.

While this might appear to be confusing or even obscure, recall that this disposition toward morality has deep roots in ancient Western thought. Aristotle, for

example, claimed that the highest human good attunes us toward “excellence” (ἀρετή), the highest good must be happiness (εὐδαιμονία).² When we genuinely pursue this highest good of happiness we aspire to higher levels of thinking (that is, reason), arriving toward excellence in human living or being. Morality, then, takes a sophisticated turn, precisely that specificity of right or wrong actions must be much more complex than simply saying that one thing or another is “right” or “wrong.”

Human excellence, according to Aristotle, then, takes practice. Excellence requires the ability to learn from failure. While this moral philosophy is rightly called “relativism,” many people get their aspirations and practices toward excellence horribly wrong and are not diligent in demanding their own excellence. This is to say people are wrong about what makes them happy, or they have corrupted notions of happiness (wealth, titles, power); and as such, they are never truly happy. Aristotle’s bleak view of humanity misunderstanding their own desires might sound awfully pretentious (though it is a *much higher view* than that of his teacher, Plato), but everyday experience on the ground floor of human problems and concerns confirms what Aristotle is saying. We really believe that what we think will make us happy will make us happy: rarely does what we believe make us happy really make us happy — because whatever it is we will always want more, believing that we would one day be satiated.

Freemasonry does not guarantee happiness, nor does it provide explicit instructions for happiness. Neither does Freemasonry ever suggest that happiness or

some *telos* of human existence is found exclusively in the lodge. But Freemasonry provides to an individual the working tools to begin, enhance, refine, or empower this process, assuring that it is never fully complete. Freemasonry might offer individuals *meaning* along the way, but that meaning is not its *purpose*.

The Allegory of the Menu

Returning to Lou Marinoff's allegory of the menu,³ like one who walks into a French restaurant without knowing the French language, one wouldn't understand the menu, even if the purpose of the menu is recognizable to facilitate the purchase of food. An uninitiated person or an initiated person who does not take Freemasonry seriously would likely fall short of having a good vocabulary to make sense of Freemasonry, even if he or she could discern its purpose as separate from what it means to individual members as universally true.

Like one who could read a French menu but cannot afford to eat anything at the restaurant, a casual participant or observer of Freemasonry could understand the meaning of Masonry, or even personally develop a powerfully meaningful experience of Masonry, but this would not necessarily lead to one understanding its purpose.

And finally, one who confuses meaning and purpose at a French restaurant would eat the menu. Although this is not the only example of such an act, an

unfortunate practice of many participants in institutions (churches, governments, lodges) and the institutions themselves to elevate the purpose of the institution to be the institution itself. This happens everywhere in our culture, where institutions like Freemasonry begin to behave as preservationist associations to police the boundaries of what is safe, familiar, and not always honest perceptions of past glories.

This is to conclude that I believe that the purpose of Freemasonry is not Freemasonry itself, nor is it necessarily morality—although traditions and morality are necessary for our future. Rather, the purpose of Freemasonry is to distinguish the difference between *meaning* and *purpose* by modeling this difference in Masonic practice (for example, emphasizing and honoring the varieties of meanings and meaningfulness experienced by individuals in the lodge), for individuals to apply to individual lives.

One of the values of Freemasonry is preciousness of time and the importance of applying discernment to the time gifted to us. This value is symbolically presented in many ways, perhaps most provocatively and profoundly in chambers of reflection, images of Father Time and the Weeping Virgin, the broken column, and the sprig of acacia. To invoke the philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, *death is tragic*, but this “tragic sense of life” that is oriented toward the reality of death and our limited time of life requires us to explore and define what our ultimate purpose is and what gives us meaning along the way as separate emphases in our day to day living.⁴ Life is more tragic when time is not handled with discernment. This realization is latent throughout

our ritual, teaching, symbols, and even our toasts, that we might discover an ultimate joy in the face of our shared temporal tragedy—even, and especially if, that joy appears quite different or unrecognizable to others.

Notes

¹ Lou Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac* (New York, Quill), 210.

² For the origins of the following brief discussion, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* §21; 1095a15-122.

³ Marinoff, 210.

⁴ Cf. Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. C. Fitch (Linden, MI: Beloved, 2016) 36-37.