

Lectures on the Philosophy of Freemasonry by Roscoe Pound

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Preston: masonry in its relation of education.

Krause: masonry in its relation to morals and law.

Oliver: Masonry in its relation to religion.

Pike: masonry in its relation to metaphysics and the problem of reality.

A twentieth-century Masonic philosophy: the relation of masonry to civilization.

Bibliography (p.[89]-92)

Edition Notes

"These lectures were first delivered before the Harvard chapter of the Acacia fraternity in the school-year 1911-12, except the lecture on Krause, which was first delivered before the Grand lodge of Nebraska in 1908, and was originally printed in the Proceedings of the body for that year. Afterwards all five lectures, revised and corrected, were published in successive numbers of the Builder, from January to May, 1915, from which they are now reprinted."--Pref.

In 1923, **Bro. H. L. Haywood** published an article in THE BUILDER MAGAZINE which was about Dean Pound's Lectures. It was entitled SCHOOLS OF MASONIC PHILOSOPHY. His article says:

I

LECTURES on the "Philosophy of Freemasonry" by Roscoe Pound, of the Law School of Harvard University, is the book wherewith to begin a study of the Philosophy of Masonry in a technical and systematic manner. The book is not bulky, and the language is simple, so that a novice need have no difficulties in reading it. I value this little manual so highly that I shall bring this series of studies of the Great Teachings of Freemasonry to conclusion by giving a rapid review of its contents, the same to be followed by reference to two or three schools not canvassed by Brother Pound, and by a suggestion of my own concerning Masonic philosophy.

The eighteenth century in England was a period of comparative quiet, despite the blow-up that came at the end of it, and men ceased very generally to quarrel over fundamental matters. It was a period of formalism when more attention was paid to manner than to matter. Also, and this is most important, it was everywhere believed that Knowledge is the greatest thing in the world and must therefore be the one aim of all endeavour.

William Preston was a true child of his century in these things, and he gave to Freemasonry a typical eighteenth century interpretation. This is especially seen in our second degree, most of which came from his hands, or at least took shape under his influence, for in that ceremony knowledge is made the great object of Masonic endeavour. The lectures consist of a series of courses in instruction in the arts and sciences after the fashion of school-room discourses. "For what does Masonry exist?

What is the end and purpose of the order? Preston would answer: To diffuse light, that is, to spread knowledge among men." In criticizing this position Brother Pound has the following provocative words to say: "Preston of course was wrong knowledge is not the sole end of Masonry. But in another way Preston was right. Knowledge is one end - at least one proximate end - and it is not the least of those by which human perfection shall be attained. Preston's mistakes were the mistakes of his century - the mistake of faith in the finality of what was known to that era, and the mistake of regarding correct formal presentation as the one sound method of instruction. But what shall be said of the greater mistake we make today, when we go on reciting his lectures - shorn and abridged till they mean nothing to the hearer - and gravely presenting them as a system of Masonic knowledge? ... I hate to think that all initiative is gone from our Order and that no new Preston will arise to take up his conception of knowledge as an end of the Fraternity and present to the Masons of today the knowledge which they ought to possess."

II

Of a very different cast, both as to intellectual equipment and moral nature, was Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, born near Leipzig in 1781, the founder of the great school of Masonic thought of which Ahrens afterwards became so powerful an exponent. In the period in which Krause grew up conceptions of the human race and of human life underwent a profound change: thinkers abandoned their allegiance to the Roman Catholic theological leaders of the Middle Ages with their dependence on supernatural ideas and resumed the principal idea of the classical Greek and Roman scientists and jurists which was that man must be known for what he is actually found to be and dealt with accordingly. The goal of all endeavours, according to this modern way of thinking, is the betterment of human life in the interest of men and women themselves - a vastly different conception from that of the Middle Ages, which was that human life must be twisted and hewn to fit a scheme of things lying outside of human life. Krause believed that Freemasonry exists in order to help perfect the human race. Our Fraternity should work in cooperation with the other institutions, such as Government, School, Church, etc., all of which exist for the same purpose. According to what principles should Masonry be governed in seeking to attain this end? "Krause answers: Masonry has to deal with the internal conditions of life governed by reason. Hence its fundamental principles are measurement and restraint - measurement by reason and restraint by reason - and it teaches these as a means of achieving perfection."

Contemporaneous with Krause, but of a type strikingly different, was the Rev. George Oliver, whose teachings so universally influenced English and American Masonic thought a half century ago. Romanticism (understood as the technical name of a school of thought) was the center of his thinking, as religion was the center of his heart. Like Sam'l Taylor Coleridge, the most eloquent interpreter of Oliver's own period, he rebelled against the dry intellectualism of the eighteenth century in behalf of speculation and imagination; he insisted that reason make way for intuition and faith; he attached a very high value to tradition: and he was very eager to reconcile Christianity with philosophy.

"What then are Oliver's answers to the three fundamental questions of Masonic philosophy?"

"1. What is the end of Masonry, for what does the institution exist? Oliver would answer, it is one in its end with religion and with science. Each of these are means through which we are brought into relation with the absolute. They are the means through which we know God and his works.

"2. How does Masonry seek to achieve its end? Oliver would answer by preserving, handing down and interpreting a tradition of immemorial antiquity, a pure tradition from the childhood of the race.

"3. What are the fundamental principles by which Masonry is governed in achieving its task? Oliver would say, the fundamental principles of Masonry are essentially the principles of religion as the basic principles of the moral world. But in Masonry they appear in a traditional form. Thus, for example, toleration in Masonry is a form of what in religion we call charity; universality in Masonry is a traditional form of what in religion we call love of one's neighbour."

Albert Pike was, during a large part of his life contemporaneous with Oliver and Krause, and consequently grew up in the same thought world, but for all that he worked out an interpretation of Masonry radically different from others. In spite of all his studies in antiquity and in forgotten philosophies and religions Pike, at the bottom of his mind, attacked the problems of Masonic thought as though no other man before him had ever heard of it. He was impatient of traditions, often scornful of other opinions, and as for the dogmas and shibboleths of the schools he would have nothing of them. What is genuinely real? that was the great question of his thinking: and accordingly his interpretation of Freemasonry took the form of a metaphysic. He was more interested in nature than in function.

"1. What is the end of Masonry? What is the purpose for which it exists? Pike would answer: The immediate end is the pursuit of light. But light means here attainment of the fundamental principle of the universe and bringing of ourselves into harmony, the ultimate unity which alone is real. Hence the ultimate end is to lead us to the Absolute - interpreted by our individual creed if we like but recognized as the final unity into which all things merge and with which in the end all things must accord. You will see here at once a purely philosophical version of what, with Oliver, was purely religious.

"2. What is the relation of Masonry to other human institutions and particularly to the state and to religion? He would answer it seeks to interpret them to us, to make them more vital for us, to make them more efficacious for their purposes by showing the ultimate reality of which they are manifestations. It teaches us that there is but one Absolute and that everything short of that Absolute is relative; is but a manifestation, so that creeds and dogmas, political or religious, are but interpretations. It teaches us to make our own interpretation for ourselves. It teaches us to save ourselves by finding for ourselves the ultimate principle by which we shall come to the real. In other words, it is

the universal institution of which other spiritual, moral and social institutions are local and temporary phases.

"3. How does Masonry seek to reach these ends? He would say by a system of allegories and of symbols handed down from antiquity which we are to study and upon which we are to reflect until they reveal the light to each of us individually. Masonry preserves these symbols and acts out these allegories for us. But the responsibility of reaching the real through them is upon each of us. Each of us has the duty of using this wonderful heritage from antiquity for himself. Masonry in Pike's view does not offer us predigested food. It offers us a wholesome fare which we must digest for ourselves. But what a feast! It is nothing less than the whole history of human search for reality. And through it he conceives, through mastery of it, we shall master the universe."

III

Brother Pound, it seems to me, might well have included in his survey two other well defined schools, one of which, it is probable, is destined to out-do all its predecessors in influence. I refer to the Historical School, and to the Mystical School, neither of which thus far has developed a leader worthy of conferring his own name on his group, though it may be said that Robert Freke Gould and Arthur Edward Waite are typical representatives.

The fundamental tenet of the historical school is that Freemasonry interprets itself through its own history. This history is not broken into separate fragments but is continuous and progressive throughout so that the unfolding story of Masonry is a gradual revelation of the nature of Masonry. Would you know what Masonry actually is, apart from what in the theory of men it appears to be? read its history. Would you know what is the future of Masonry? trace out the tracks of its past development, and from them you can plot the curves of its future developments. Would you discover what are the ideals and possibilities of the Fraternity? study to learn what it has been trying to do in the past and is now trying to do.

This philosophy makes a profound appeal to men in this day when science, with its interest in history, development and evolution, rules in the fields of thought, and I have no doubt that more and more it will be found necessary for the leaders of contemporary Masonry to master the history of past Masonry, especially because Masonry, more than most institutions, derives from and is dependent on its own past. Nevertheless, in Masonry as in all other fields, philosophy cannot be made identical with history for the reason that such a method does not provide for new developments. What if some mighty leader - another Albert Pike, for example - were to arise now and give the course of Masonic evolution an entirely new twist, what could the historians do about it? Nothing. They would have no precedents to go by. An adequate philosophy must understand the nature of Masonry by insight and intuition as well as by history. Also, Masonry must not shut itself away from the creative genius of new leaders, else it petrify itself into immobile sterility, and condemn itself to the mere repetition of its own past. A great public institution must ever-more work in the midst of the world and constantly learn to

apply itself to its own new tasks as they arise in the world; otherwise it becomes no institution at all, but the plaything of a little coteric.

Of the school of Masonic Mysticism it is more difficult to speak, and this partly for the reason that mysticism itself, by virtue of its own inner nature, cannot become clearly articulate but must utter itself darkly by hints and symbols. On the one side mysticism is ever tending to become occultism; on the other side it has close affinities with theology. All three words - mysticism, occultism, and theology - are frequently used interchangeably in such wise as to cause great confusion of thought. Owing to this shuffling of use and meaning of its own ideas and terms the school of Masonic mysticism has thus far not been able to wrest itself free from entangling alliances in order to stand independently on its own feet as an authentic interpreter of the Great Teachings of the Craft. But in spite of all these handicaps a few of our scholars have been able to give us a tolerably consistent and, in some cases, a very noble account of Freemasonry in the terms of mysticism. Notable among these is Bro. A.E. Waite, whose volume, "Studies in Mysticism," is not as widely known as it should be.

To Brother Waite - unless I have sadly misread him, a thing not at all impossible, for he is not always easy to follow - the inner and living stuff of all religion consists of mysticism; and mysticism is a first-hand experience of things Divine, the classic examples of which are the great mystics among whom Plotinus, St. Francis, St. Theresa, Ruysbroeck, and St. Rose of Lima may be named as typical. According to the hypothesis the spiritual experience of these geniuses in religion gives us an authentic report of the Unseen and is as much to be relied on as any flesh-and-blood report of the Seen; but unfortunately the realities of the Unseen are ineffable, consequently they cannot be described to the ordinary non-mystical person at all except in the language of ritual and symbolism. It is at this point that Freemasonry comes in. According to the mystical theory our Order is an instituted form of mysticism in the ceremonies and symbols of which men may find, if they care to follow them, the roads that lead to a direct and first-hand experience of God.

IV

If I may come at last to speak for myself I believe that there is now shaping in our midst, and will some day come to the front, a Masonic philosophy that will not quarrel with these great schools but will at the same time replace them by a larger and more complete synthesis. I have no idea what this school will be called. It will be human, social, and pragmatic, and it will exist for use rather than show. It will not strive to carry the Masonic institution to some goal beyond and outside of humanity but will see in Freemasonry a wise and well-equipped means of enriching human life as it now is and in this present familiar world. We men do not exist to glorify the angels or to realize some superhuman scheme remote from us. Human life is an end in itself, and it is the first duty of men to live happily, freely, joyously. This is God's own purpose for us, and, unless all modern religious thinking has gone hopelessly astray, God's life and ours are so bound up together that His purposes and His will coincide with our own great human aims. When man is completely man God's will then be done.

As things now are we men and women have not yet learned how to live happily with each other, and there is a great rarity of human charity under the sun. Why can't we learn to know ourselves and each other and our world in such wise as to organize ourselves together into a human family living happily together? That, it seems to me, should be the great object of Freemasonry.