

GREAT DEBATES IN THE MASONIC FRATERNITY

HOW GREAT ARE THEY?

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If it is a disgrace to a man when he cannot defend himself in a bodily way, it would be absurd not to think him disgraced when he cannot defend himself with reason in a speech.

- Aristotle, *The Rhetoric*.¹

There is no limit to the number of topics that could spark a spirited debate. Controversy is everywhere.

Debate can lead us to question our assumptions, challenge us to defend our ideas, and prepare us to probe for a more complete understanding of the issues defining our times.

Since at least 1740, debating societies have existed, but they were usually comprised of exclusive groups and more secretive societies.² By the early eighteenth century, such organizations became prominent societal fixtures of life in London, largely due to increased membership from London's growing middle class.

Topics that were debated covered a broad spectrum of areas. The debating societies allowed participants from both genders and all social backgrounds to participate, thus making them an excellent example of the enlarged public sphere of the Age of Enlightenment.³ Debating societies were a phenomenon associated with the simultaneous rise of a platform for criticism and the development of new ideas and philosophies.⁴



¹ Stanley Frost Publisher, *Rhetoric* (Aristotle), 2013. (Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a collection of lecture notes and ancient Greek treatise on the art of persuasion, dating from the 4th century BCE).

² Mary Thale, "London Debating Societies in the 1790s," *The Historical Journal* 32, no. 1, March 1989, 58-9.

³ Mary Thale, "The Case of the British Inquisition: Money and Women in Mid-Eighteenth-Century London Debating Societies," *Albion* 31, no. 1, Spring 1999.

⁴ James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Different debate formats were established over the centuries to formally examine many lofty questions about science, literature, philosophy, religion, media, politics, human behavior, and, of course, even what might be thought of as lighter questions like What makes a better pet? Cats or dogs?

The art of true debate involves mastering skills of obvious intrinsic value: the confidence to speak in public and make sense; the construction of a logical argument; the ability to read an audience's reactions; and, perhaps most importantly, the willingness to hear others' arguments and respond to them.

Debate teaches how to develop good arguments and find and expose the flaws in bad ones, present the best arguments for a position, and understand the weaknesses of others' positions and ours. Debate also teaches how to use reliable sources of information and appreciate how all information is not good. We also learn through debate how to evaluate sources and find those most reliable and valuable as we gather evidence from many sources and assess and compare their contentions.

The art of true debate involves mastering skills of obvious intrinsic value: the confidence to speak in public, and make sense; the construction of a logical argument; the ability to read an audience's reactions; and, perhaps most importantly, the willingness to hear the arguments of others, and to respond to them.

It is possible, however, for a person or group to come out on top of a debate without making a single logically valid or factually correct statement. All that is needed for this to happen is for listeners to be sufficiently ignorant about a topic or be biased.

This results in what we too often call or consider debates *intellectually meaningless* and only reinforces the preconceived notions that guide many people. It is one thing to have an opinion and to discuss it, and another to have a point of view that can be articulated, supported by reason, and include facts.

Let's agree that the primary goal of an informed debate is for a person to generate effective, critical thinking into primary issues on the given topic. It is easy to see how opinion and anecdotal offerings commonly used to support one are useless in an actual, rule-governed debate.

We find a lot of preconceived notions and anecdotal arguments to support opinions within the ranks of the Fraternity.

RHETORIC IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

A synonym for rhetoric is *persuasion*, and to study rhetoric is to study speaking and writing to persuade others. Rhetoric is intended to have substance, which is why it goes hand-in-hand with grammar and logic to make up the three ancient arts of discourse.⁵ Those three arts are part of the 7 Liberal Arts and Sciences with which Freemasons are charged and encouraged to study. Unfortunately, as we know to be more of a practice, few Freemasons today take this instruction with a level of seriousness and make little to no further effort to examine the nature of these arts once they pass through the degrees.⁶

⁵ E. P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric For The Modern Student*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, 1, and R. E., Young, A. L., Becker, and K. L Pike, *Rhetoric: Discovery And Change*. New York, Harcourt Brace & World, 1970, 1.

⁶ Stephen Dafoe, "The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences," *The Masonic Dictionary*, <http://www.masonicdictionary.com/arts.html>, accessed, June 22, 2021.

GREAT DEBATES IN FREEMASONRY?

What are the “great debates” in Freemasonry over the past century or more that we find common in many Lodges?

Frequently “debated” is the menu for the next Lodge meal. Another is whether we should spend a goodly portion of an evening meeting reading minutes and listening to penny-by-penny accounts from the Treasurer, or is it best to relegate that oversight management to the principal officers?

The story of one “debater” taking the position that minutes must be read in Lodge; otherwise, there would be nothing to talk about during the meetings is one of the many things that make many Masons wonder if the time they set aside for Lodge might be better spent elsewhere.

Would formatted, well-structured, and informed debate be any more persuasive to those who practice disagreeableness or are argumentative? We would certainly like to think so, but our factual history has not proven that to be a good wager because we rarely *debate*. We merely exchange opinions and thoughts based on anecdotes on various topics that pass for “debate.”

PERSUADING THE UNPERSUADABLE

Reasoning enables the human mind to go beyond mere perception, habit, and instinct and distinguishes us from other creatures in the world. Recent research, although controversial, tells us that reasoning is most stimulating when done as a group, which, according to the research, explains why “all humans are not optimized to reason effectively alone.”⁷

As research points out, reasoning is very difficult for humans to do effectively because it is difficult for individuals to doubt their own beliefs (confirmation bias: ignoring information that does not fit our beliefs). But when in groups, we tend to find reason in our positions and perhaps do so more easily, which, according to the research, explains how humans evolved and separated themselves from other animals that have not come close to honing the skill of reasoning.⁸ In other words, reasoning enables the human mind to go beyond mere perception, habit, impulse, and instinct.

The key word in that research is “enables.” The research makes no claim that each of us regularly practices what we have, even in groups.

REASONING WITH THE UNREASONABLE

There is no shortage of people who are so sure of themselves that they reject worthy ideas from others even when valid research supports a different course of action. We do find that in the Fraternity. But again, turning to research, getting those who are set in their ways, the overconfident, stubborn, self-absorbed, and the disagreeable, to open their minds is not as impossible as it may seem.

A growing body of evidence shows that personality traits are not necessarily consistent from one situation to the next in groups. Even the most rigid among us flex at times, and even the most open-minded have

⁷ Hugo Mercier, Dan Sperber, “Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2011, 34, 57–74.

⁸ Hugo Mercier, Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2017.

moments when they shut down. So, if we want to reason with unreasonable people, we must pay attention to instances when they—or others like them—change their minds.⁹

We learn from the research that a better approach is to let such people recognize the gaps in their own understanding of a matter. Trying to explain something complex can be a humbling experience, so continuing to ask someone who is rigid in their position to explain how something they advocate works can be quite humbling for that person. Intractable people see consistency and certainty as virtues. Once made up, their minds seem to be set in stone. Their views, however, become more pliable if you hand them a chisel.¹⁰

Asking questions instead of giving answers *can* overcome defensiveness. By not telling someone what to think or do, they are given some control over the conversation and invited to share their thoughts. Questions like “What if?” and “Could we?” spark creativity by making people curious about what is possible.¹¹ And, of course, asking, “Why do you think that?” or “What makes you think that?” can lead to a very lively conversation and allow someone to outline their position and clarify the weight of the information they use to support it.

Persuading those who discount the views of others, and practice disagreeableness and argumentativeness, is clearly not an impossible task; it can take more time, in many cases, patience and persistence. Tearing down confirmation bias requires time and a hardy dose of reasoning.

CONCLUSION

The framework through which we see the world is depicted and defined in the statements we make, as well as assumptions, concepts, themes, and shared ideas. To be persuaded toward those things that have proven effective in improving our collective and individual flights and life journeys requires *informed rhetoric—reason*.

Most famous for representing the thought of the Enlightenment is, *Encyclopédie*. The 1772 book showcased new schools of thought in all branches of intellectual activity and attempted to gather all available knowledge, examine it critically and rationally, and use it for social advancement.¹²

The frontispiece of *Encyclopédie* is laden with symbolism. It serves as an allegorical composition in which female figures representing Reason and Philosophy unveil the figure of Truth (the central symbol of the Enlightenment) positioned in the upper center of the composition.

A radiant light emanates from her, while to the left, Imagination prepares to adorn her with a garland of flowers. Other allegorical figures representing the arts, sciences, and trades look at or display instruments or texts specific to their fields.¹³

How many Masons would be interested enough to attend and perhaps even participate in a formal, structured debate grounded in reason on the topics most critical to American Freemasonry today?

⁹ Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*, Viking, 2021, and Harvard Business Review, “Persuading the Unpersuadable,” March-April 2021.

¹⁰ *IBID.*

¹¹ *IBID.*

¹² Lynn Hunt, *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures: A Concise History: Volume II: Since 1340*, Second Edition, Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.

¹³ MIT Library Exhibits, *Introduction to the Encyclopédie*, <https://libraries.mit.edu/exhibits/diderots-encyclopedia-exhibit-preview/introduction>, accessed August 1, 2021, and, Robert Shackleton “The Encyclopedie,” *Proceedings, American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 114, No. 5, 1970, 39.

Perhaps the larger question is how many would open their minds to learning something if they did?

Those questions would make for a genuine, *great debate*.

