

# THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

## PHILOSOPHICALLY SPEAKING IN FREEMASONRY

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**P**hilosophical questions become the framework of our identities, and, our answers to them can determine the quality and even the trajectory of our lives. What we believe matters. Philosophy provides an equation to help better understand the nature of life, and can lead us to choose what we will believe.

We all have a specific set of ideas. We all have basic concepts about knowledge, right and wrong, the value of things and about how to do something or how to live and let live. Whether our ideas are based on well-grounded philosophy or merely an opinion is worth examining.

The aim of philosophy is to deepen understanding—something we should all be seeking to do about everything. However, dipping a toe in the prismatic pool of thought is not something everyone always does. Like opinions, our philosophies reveal *us* to others and the philosophy of others reveals *them* to us.

When our ideas are backed up by observable facts or reality (reasoning), we find philosophy and consider it truthful, which is what makes a philosophy worth considering. When ideas are based on opinion that is not backed up by fact or reason, we find only what a person thinks. Regardless, philosophy or mere opinion can become both the framework and content of our identity and reality, which then influences our behavior and reaction to circumstance. The fact that philosophy provides reasoning to back up what it presents makes it distinctly different from opinion, and therefore worth noticing and analyzing.

Philosophy plays a direct role in education because it improves critical thinking skills, closer reading, clearer writing, and logical analysis.<sup>1</sup> Opinion, merely what a person thinks about something, hardly demands the rule of reason and fact to support it. Having opinions and being passionate about them can be admirable, but it is difficult to expect anyone to abandon their own thoughts and philosophies in favor of an opinion that is not supported by the rule of reason and fact.

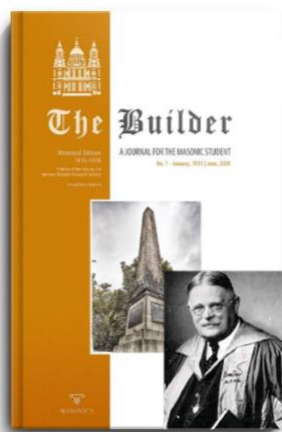


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<sup>1</sup> Brian Collins, "Adding Substance to the Debate: Descartes on Freedom of the Will," *Essays in Philosophy*, July 27, 2013, Pacific Oregon University, July 27, 2013.

If we never stop to consider the meaning and purpose in our lives or to question our beliefs, our vision can only include that which is within our comfort zone and our personal, sometimes small, and limited, frames of reference. The man who has no hint of philosophy often goes through life trapped in the preconceptions that come from unexamined, habitual beliefs attendant to his age or his culture, and from convictions that have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his own deliberate reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

Masonic scholars have never been at one with respect to the scope and purpose of Freemasonry.<sup>3</sup> Since our lessons revolve around the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, and behavior, it seems rather odd that we do not find a lot of philosophical discussions and examinations of those important underpinnings about much of anything in all of our lodges on any regular basis. A discussion in lodge as to why there is such a chasm between what we say that we do, and what we actually do, would prove quite interesting.



By the earliest years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Masons had long outgrown the notion that Freemasonry is to be held to one purpose or is to be hemmed in by the confines of one philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Roscoe Pound, a distinguished American legal and Masonic scholar, wrote about that in 1911. In one of the most exhaustive writings about Masonic philosophy at the time, if not the finest, Pound connected Masonic thinking with the general thought of the time and place in which members and Masonic scholars did their work.

Pound demonstrated how generations have attempted to answer two questions about Freemasonry. One, *what are the fundamental principles by which Masonry is governed in attaining the end it seeks?* Two, *what ought those principles be?*

The fact that the Institution of Freemasonry has been able to accept the influences of men such as James Anderson, William Preston, Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, George Oliver, Albert Mackey, Robert Freke Gould, Albert Pike, Pound, and others, is significant. It demonstrates that Masonry is a living organism. So, while Masonry has its tenets and its customs (some think of them as traditions), its future lies in the fact that it can change itself so as to impart its lessons under the conditions of the moment. However, when an institution becomes static, when it can no longer adapt itself to the conditions under which it exists, it fails to accomplish its purpose and is no longer relevant to society at large (although it may remain relevant to much smaller groups of men who earnestly pursue its principles).

*...the future of Freemasonry lies with the men who have the courage to re-interpret where re-interpretation is necessary, to reform where reformation is necessary, yet at the same time preserving the fundamental character of the Institution.*

Under this premise, the future of Freemasonry lies with the men who have the courage to re-interpret where re-

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, Chapter XV, "The Value of Philosophy," Independently published, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Roscoe Pound, *The Philosophy of Freemasonry*, Five Lectures Delivered under the Auspices of the Grand Master of Massachusetts, Masonic Temple, Boston, Harvard College Library, 1915. The five-part series also later appeared in *The Builder* No. 1, Vol. I., January 1915.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

interpretation is necessary, to reform where reformation is necessary, yet at the same time preserving the *fundamental* character of the Institution.<sup>5</sup>

Today, the country continues to march by as American Freemasonry seems to rest serene in the ruts created by the unbridled rapid expansion of membership in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, deepened by the steady, 60-year decline in not only membership but public interest in, and a general awareness of, the fraternity. *Have we reached that static point and are no longer able to effectively impart the lessons of Freemasonry while preserving its fundamental character under the conditions of the moment?*

We deal with something that was, perhaps, impossible to imagine just a generation ago: the internet and social media. It is possible today for virtually every member of the fraternity (if they are interested in doing so) to hypothesize, pontificate, rant, be perceived as a doctrinist, an expert on Masonic law, and a certified constitutionalist, when they voice their solutions to the questions about the fundamental principles by which Masonry is governed, how it attains the end it seeks, and what ought those principles be. They may billboard their thoughts for the world, no matter their credentials to do so. Each member choosing to do that, of course, has that right and privilege as a Mason to voice their views under the guidelines of their respective jurisdictions, but we cannot deny that doing so under the concept that “anything goes” certainly dapples viewpoints of other Masons and the public. Worse, it can come across as universal philosophy to those who do not know the distinction between philosophy and opinion unless it is clearly stated that what is posted is one or the other.

*Could it possibly be that we do not always deliver on what we say we provide to all our candidates and members?*

Although Pound’s writing about the philosophy of Masonry did espouse that “Our Fraternity is to be of all men and for all men; it is to be of all time and for all time,” he did not proclaim that the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, and behavior on which Freemasonry is based needed changing or alteration, but rather that the way we approach making

Freemasonry’s tenets appeal to all men in each generation needs constant attention by our members and leaders if we are to preserve those principles.

Despite the spread of the idea of organized Freemasonry around the world since the early years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (a process that has included forming, shaping, building, administering, operating, leading, and managing an all-volunteer organization that is grounded in the principles of life’s truths), the consistency in which that purpose has held the full attention of all those admitted into our ranks has proven lacking—even though one might presume the opposite could be true. Discussing the reason for this would make an interesting topic for an evening in lodge.

The institution has brought many men into the ranks and at certain times in history Freemasonry has been a constructive influence on the societies in which it is practiced. Many Masons believe that fact alone is enough to hail the success of Freemasonry. If so, we have to wonder why records extending back into the mid-1800s tell us that only a small percentage of members have ever been active, involved, and engaged in their lodges? *Could it possibly be that we do not always deliver on what we say we provide to all our candidates and members?*

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald W. Meier, “The Influence Of Men On Masonry,” An Oration, Grand Orator of the Grand Lodge Of Washington, Delivered Before Grand Lodge of Washington, 19 June 1946, 11.

Now, if we were to discuss that question in depth it would likely lead us to ask, *why* is the membership of the institution and the level of awareness of Freemasonry by the public continuing to shrink despite the menagerie of ideas and efforts over the past 60 years that made it easier to be admitted. We adopted and promoted creative marketing slogans, and, simultaneously, skewed various aspects of our historical purpose, and, even sanctioned, in some cases, open solicitation. The undeniable purpose of those ideas was to attract more members, but we find no supportable evidence that those ideas did anything but ignore the clear need of addressing, with equal energy, the need *to retain* the members already in the ranks, or to provide more sustaining levels of engagement.

The discussion of that question logically leads to another: *can the success and strength of Freemasonry, as an institution, be defined by merely counting the names on our membership rolls, or is the real strength and success of Freemasonry found elsewhere, and if so, where?*

If we candidly discuss such matters and inject the rule of reasoning and fact, we eventually get to another question: *have we lost generations of potentially committed men who came and found that what lodges actually offered was different than what they thought or were told that they would find?* If the answer is yes, then are we not then required to first examine what it is that men expect to find in our lodges, then compare their expectations to what they actually find? Would not such an analysis at least in part explain why many did not progress, became inactive, or, without fanfare, faded away? Those are questions well-worth pondering, especially at this time in the history of Freemasonry in the United States when public interest and membership has declined with such an alarming steadiness since around the middle of the last century.

*Is it remotely possible that external reasons for the lack of ability to retain all of those admitted are not as great as internal reasons?*

An examination of reasons public interest in Freemasonry has declined so steadily over the past 60 years has actually been taking place since the mid-1960s in every jurisdiction, which begs another question, *has anyone been listening or paying attention?*<sup>6</sup>

The two most widely accepted causes we hear attributed to the decline in membership and public awareness is that our external society has changed, along with the worn-out rationale that today, men are just too busy. The majority of the last two generations of Masons have, for all intent and purpose, accepted those two reasons with an extraordinary absence of debate, and with a conspicuous avoidance of looking inward for causes with the same scrutiny as when as they look outwardly.

It is foolish to deny that American culture has changed. The idea, that men today are too busy, however, carries the shallow assumption that men in the past *were not* busy. If we pretend to believe that men in the past were not busy, then are we also saying, in effect, that there had to be other

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<sup>6</sup> Masonic Renewal Task Force Reports: Phase I Research (Attitudes of Non-Masons towards joining organizations such as Freemasonry.); Phase II Research (Attitudes of Masons toward Freemasonry), produced by, Barton-Gillet Co. of Baltimore, & Opinion Research Corporation, Published by Masonic Service Association, 1989. Singer, Robert. *How Do Non-Masons and Masons View Freemasonry?* Presentation to The Conference of Grand Masters of North America, Salt Lake City, Utah, February 1990. BMS Survey, *Awareness Freemasonry in the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, unpublished survey conducted in Louisville, Paintsville, Frankfort, Owensboro, Paducah, Covington, Lexington, Maysville, Bowling Green, Ashland, Kenneth Schwendeman, Richmond, Kentucky, 2014. *A Public Awareness Campaign For 2022*, White Paper, John W. Bizzack, Brian T. Evans, John, Cissell, Dan M. Kemble, (ed.), March 24, 2021, Appendix, Grand Lodge of Kentucky Survey, February 2021, 35.

reasons our records show that Masons in the past were no more engaged or moderately active in their lodge than today? *What might be those reasons?* Those questions set up another potentially lively discussion for a lodge meeting.

Possibly, after a productive discussion where long-standing propensities to avoid an honest examination into such matters are suspended, we might find there could be other significant causes that have rarely been found even near the top of lists: internal causes—what we do or do not do in our lodges.

In the 1960s American Freemasons were given two excruciatingly honest overviews and assessments of our fraternity by Indiana Past Grand Master Dwight L. Smith.<sup>7</sup> Smith's papers provided modern answers to vexing questions that faced American Freemasonry then and still today. The issues have largely gone unaddressed since Smith's publications. He clearly explains in his writings how the fraternity has long unmoored itself from its historical purpose.

This was not the first time the fraternity heard what Smith presented. In fact, such insight and on-target assessment about the fraternity drifting from its purpose can be found in the volumes of Annual Grand Lodge Proceedings from around the nation as early as 100 years before Smith. Evidently, many members did not listen or pay attention any more than they do today.

Now, it would be a blatant overstatement to claim that every Mason or every lodge was, or is today, completely untethered from the historical purpose and intent of the Craft. While there are indeed lodges around the nation that seem to hold on only by a thread, some thrive—not just survive. Those lodges make significant advances and continue to slowly re-braid that tie to our historical purpose. Unsurprisingly, those “re-braiding” lodges place premiums on aspects of Freemasonry not usually observed in most other lodges: their philosophy of the aim and purpose of the Craft is conspicuously different. A fair-minded discussion of those philosophical differences might prove quite useful in lodges that seek more than what has become dreadfully repetitious, and merely routine.

While the realities that can emerge from many such philosophical discussions may frustrate our desire for quick answers, deny us easy answers to big questions, and undermine complacent convictions, they can help liberate us from narrow minded, conventional thinking and slowly open minds to new possibilities. Philosophical discussions about anything have never proven a quick fix to problems or difficulties. That is far from their purpose. They have proven, and, when conducted in the way that they should, continue to prove to be a great start toward more effectively addressing the issues that confront us.

Philosophical discussions can help us in the essential work of attempting to resolve *some* of the big questions, if, by nothing else, revealing just how hard it is to resolve those big questions.

Regardless, earnest discussions can lead to more questions and more discussion. If what such discussions reveal clearly identifies a need for constructive change in the way the promise of Freemasonry is delivered, then doing so depends on the intelligence of those participating, and their

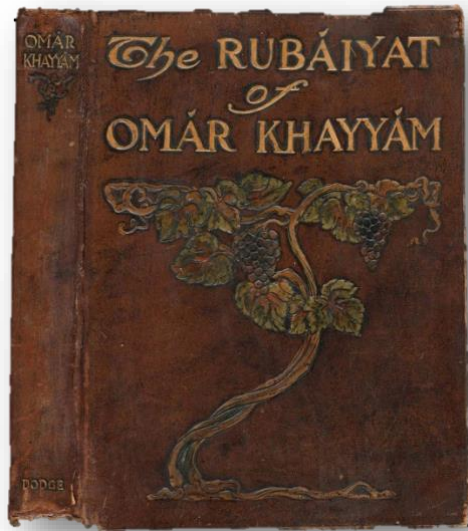
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<sup>7</sup> Dwight L. Smith, "Why This Confusion In The Temple?" 1970. Masonic Service Association, 27. 2007[http://masonicrestorationfoundation.org/documents/DLS\\_WhyThisConfusion.pdf](http://masonicrestorationfoundation.org/documents/DLS_WhyThisConfusion.pdf), accessed January 2012, "Whither Are We Traveling?" 1963, [http://masonicrestorationfoundation.org/documents/DLS\\_WhitherAreWeTraveling.pdf](http://masonicrestorationfoundation.org/documents/DLS_WhitherAreWeTraveling.pdf), accessed, January 2014.

collective will to implement change.

## THE MOVING FINGER

Omar Khayyam was a 10<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar who was a poet, philosopher, mathematician, astronomer, and music theorist. One of the first to recognize the connection between music and arithmetic, he also created a system classification of musical scales.



Inside his poetry we find philosophy. Most of his popular fame in the modern period is a direct result of translations of his poems into English in 1859 — particularly one of his poems.

In continuous publication for well over a century and translated into more than 85 languages, Khayyam's, *The Rubaiyat*, is one of the best-known poems in the world, and has been a lasting influence on English literature, art, and music.

What makes *The Rubaiyat* unfailingly relevant is that it deals with the big questions of life: *why are we here and what is life all about?*

Khayyam depicts a simple man who finds comfort by escaping into material and presumably other pleasures.

The man seems to make his life better but questions the necessity of learning to subdue his passions in efforts to do so. He is troubled by the questions of the nature of reality, the impermanence and uncertainty of life and man's relationship to God, but finds no acceptable answers to his perplexities. The man may want meaningful change, but he wants it without effort, without personal responsibility, without commitment, and by simply remaining the same.

The first quatrain of the poem starts with the capitalized word, AWAKE, which is intended to urge the reader to go out and constructively *use* their life.

There is one line in *The Rubaiyat* that is often acknowledged as the most profound sentence in the work.

In Stanza 51 we find, “The moving finger writes and having writ moves on nor all your piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”

The *moving finger writes* is Khayyam's expression of the reality that whatever one does in one's life is one's own responsibility and cannot be changed. To put it another way, it means that what is done is done.

The *moving finger* is a symbol for outcome, or for time.

The reality that Khayyam is calling to our attention is that once the moment is past, it is gone. There is no way to change it or erase it, regardless of your prayers, or cleverness, or anything else. While we can never turn back time, we can change our course in life if we commit to the worthwhile laudable pursuit, and unending quest, to become better.

To accomplish that as men (or as an organization) it is necessary, as Khayyam writes, to 'AWAKE.'

In American Freemasonry, it is time to accept that what has been done, is done. For those who do not see or understand this reality, it is time for them to learn about it and do the same: accept it. We cannot and should not selectively impose our thinking today on the politics and circumstances of the past. All we can do is strive to understand it, and draw from its lessons: both good and bad. Doing otherwise sails a ship that goes in circles.

We are clearly at time in our history where moving forward in context with the factual lessons of our past serving as the rudder is critical. Furthermore, we all must understand that ships move slowly and accept the reality that when their rudder is deep and the ship is pointed in the right direction, each mile is an improvement, albeit slow.

We will never have a rudder deep enough, or be able to point the ship in the right direction, unless we practice, as an organization, much more honest and collective introspection than our history shows we have in the past 60 years alone, and then commit to correcting the course. Those who merely accept the idiomatic phrase, "It Is What It Is" become the crew of the ship that sails blindly in circles.

Men have never been given the authority to come to Freemasonry and change its core values. Instead, they have been challenged by virtue of their voluntary admittance to put those values to use in their respective lives to make themselves better, thus at the same time, establish the way Freemasonry can make a man better by actually delivering its promise. Doing that, brothers, is, and always has been, the challenge.

## **CONCLUSION**

Ask a random Freemason today the purpose of Freemasonry and the likely response will be what has become a marketing slogan: *to make good men, better.*

Naturally, such a response begs another question, *how does Freemasonry do that?*

*When was the last time you participated in a lodge meeting where those first and second questions were examined, then extensively discussed?*

*Would such a discussion reveal the level of familiarity our members have with respect to the factual historical design, aim, and purpose of the Craft?*

*Would such a discussion lead to a more extensive examination about what we actually offer to our members and those we admit, versus what we say we do and provide?*

*Would such a philosophical discussion in your lodge (on this question or one of the others in this paper) be constructive or would it devolve into only showcasing the predictable cliches and opinions grounded on familiar marketing slogans or a spew of merely personal sentiments?*

*Would such a discussion reveal how unmoored we have become from our historical purpose, or would it lead us to a haughty conclusion that what we have done in the past, and continue doing today, is thought to be so effective that there is no room, or need for, improvement?*

If we witness the latter, then we have observed firsthand how some members today continue to thoughtlessly embrace the thinking exhibited by many members from the middle of the last century. Chances are high that those arguing in support of that thinking also think that the solution to

*The problems facing*

*American Freemasonry are*

*not about core values, they are*

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*instruct and present them.*

American Freemasonry's lethargy is an infusion of more members. Those men continue to cling to the notion that nothing in the way of how lodges approach the delivery of our core values should change. That thinking should, in an alarming fashion, illustrate the extent of the labors ahead if there is to be a constructive course sailed—or one that is not the same unproductive heading sailed for the past six or more decades. The problems facing American Freemasonry are not about core values, they are about how lodges can best instruct and present them. Roscoe Pound was right.

I submit that if such a discussion and conversation was open and frank, and moderated in the way that gentlemen should conduct such introspective discussions, that no matter the conclusion, there would be benefits to not only the men, but to our Craft in general, because we would be actually talking about what we do and do not do in Freemasonry in a new light. Moreover, we would be doing so, in of all places, our lodges.

*Incomplete knowledge becomes dangerous when relied upon as complete knowledge.*

If we find agreement that the basic purpose of our Craft is to *make better men out of good men* and to do that our emphasis is placed on the individual man by strengthening his character, improving his moral and spiritual outlook, *and* broadening his intellectual horizons, then we must regularly examine *how* it is that we do or can best accomplish that. If we find that we are falling short, then there is much more to do, and we find a long list of matters begging for more discussion.

As a side note, perhaps another philosophical discussion we might find constructive in our lodges is why do we not have such philosophical discussions on a more regular basis?

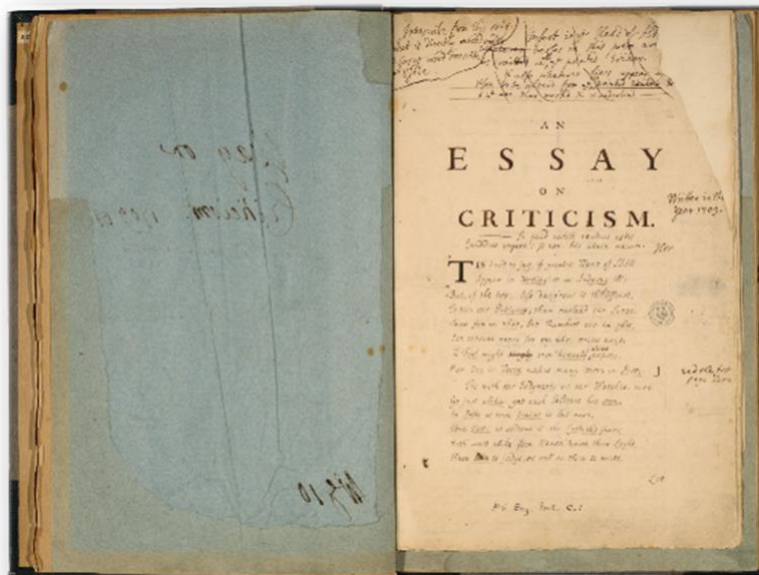
Brothers, the moving finger continues to write.

We are living in a time that is witnessing a slow but certain paradigm shift in our fraternity. Members and leaders who do not see, or choose to acknowledge, that over the past 30 years that shift is happening, and slowly continues, might wish to try and come to terms with that fact.

As noted earlier, the lessons of Freemasonry do actually revolve around the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, and behavior. Should we not seek a more regular collective discussion about those lessons before they fade even more?



The idiom “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing” is often attributed to Albert Einstein as the source, when, in fact, it is a line found in one of Alexander Pope’s writings called, *An Essay in Criticism*, written 168 years before Einstein was born.<sup>8</sup> Those who attribute the idiom to Einstein illustrate how mindlessly we pass on something someone tells us (or what we have heard) without further examination, and how easy it is to become overconfident about our expertise in a certain subject if we possess only a small amount of knowledge about it. Incomplete knowledge becomes dangerous when relied upon as complete knowledge. How that is apparent in Freemasonry would also make for a lively discussion in lodge.



*Are we able, at this time in our history, to re-moor ourselves and our organization to the historical intent and purpose of Freemasonry?*

Presenting that question at a lodge meeting would, perhaps, lead to the liveliest of all discussions, and eventually guide us to other discussions that have not taken place in many lodges for longer than most Masons in America realize or acknowledge.

The moving finger continues to write our factual history. What role will or do you play?

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Pope, *An Essay in Criticism*, Part III, Hartford, England, 1711.