

2016 Kellerman Lecture for West Australia IS FREEMASONRY A PROGRESSIVE SCIENCE?

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“A man’s unstated assumptions, those he is often not aware of, are usually the mainspring of his thought”¹

INTRODUCTION

It might appear strange that a book on cricket should inspire a paper on Freemasonry, but in the phrase quoted above, there is encapsulated the contention that our individual Masonic knowledge can only be understood in the context of our own individual life experiences, our education, and upbringing. This paper will also explore what is meant by the injunction to make a daily advance in Masonic knowledge, and what is meant by the term “progressive science”. It will propose that Freemasonry, as in science, requires a constant examination of its principals, precepts, rituals and underlying assumptions. To introduce this idea, it will call upon the work of Thomas Kuhn, especially with regard to the paradigm shift.

The hypothesis considered here is that Freemasonry, for the individual Freemason, must not allow itself to become a fixed idea like, for example, the earth-centric model of the universe, but must grow and develop within his heart; at the same time ensuring that the Antient Landmarks are at all times preserved and respected. Older paradigms must give way to new; shallow understanding must give way to a deeper understanding: it is only by critical daily examination of our understanding that we uncover the errors in our thinking. This is our daily advance in Masonic knowledge. It does, however, assume that we need to find as individuals, new ways in the understanding of our rituals.

WHAT IS SCIENCE?

In 2009, the UK Science Council proposed the following definition of science²:

“Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence.”

The Science Council went on to define “systematic methodology” as follows:

- Objective observation: Measurement and data (possibly although not necessarily using mathematics as a tool)
- Evidence
- Experiment and/or observation as benchmarks for testing hypotheses
- Induction: reasoning to establish general rules or conclusions drawn from facts or examples
- Repetition
- Critical analysis
- Verification and testing: critical exposure to scrutiny, peer review, and assessment.

¹ James, C L R “Beyond a Boundary”, Serpent’s Tail, 1963

² www.sciencecouncil.org/definition

This definition defines science as a pursuit, rather than a body of knowledge together with a method of examining and reviewing that knowledge.

Wikipedia uses J L Heilbron's definition of science³

"Science is a systematic enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of testable explanations and predictions about the universe."

The 2006 Kellerman Lecture, "Science, Freemasonry and the Third Millennium"⁴ by WBro Robert Collins Barnes of the Victorian Lodge of Research, offers the following discussion on science:

"Science seeks to understand, order and explain every part of our world and the universe. It does this using the scientific method, an objective process wherein data is collected, measured, tested, assessed and ordered, allowing sound conclusions to be reached. This scientific method allows the development of ideas, hypotheses, concepts, models, theories, and ultimately laws. As such, science is empirically based, initially reaching tentative findings (conclusions) which become more certain (or fail) as more quantifiable data is accumulated. Science, therefore, is a self-critical, self-correcting, growing system of empirical (or factual) understanding, allowing practitioners (the true 'believers') to manipulate the world around us in a very predictable manner."

For the purposes of this paper, the following definition will be adopted:

Science is a body of knowledge about the Universe (or part of it), together with a self-critical system of attempting to understand the Universe (or part of it), and a collection of rigorous methods to test hypotheses developed from observations of it.

KNOWLEDGE, EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE ANTIENT LANDMARKS

A major question for epistemology (philosophy of knowledge) is whether knowledge exists independently of the individual (objectivism) or can only be understood by the individual in terms of their life experience, education, cultural norms, religious beliefs and upbringing (constructivism).

As might be expected the answer to this conundrum depends on what is considered to be knowledge. Science tells us that there are a number of universal constants, for example the speed of light *in vacuo* ($\approx 3.0 \times 10^8$ metres per second), the universal gravitational constant, the acceleration due to gravity at the Earth's surface, etc; geography tells us that the capital of Australia is Canberra; by convention April, June and September each have 30 days. In mathematics, an axiom is a premise so evident as to be accepted as true without controversy, the point from which reasoning commences. The postulates of Euclid's Elements of Geometry are the axioms of his study.

In the context of this paper, the Antient Landmarks are the universal constants and axioms of Freemasonry. The late Harry Carr suggested that a Landmark is something in Freemasonry that

³ 3 Heilbron, J. L. (editor-in-chief) (2003), *The Oxford Companion to the History of Modern Science*, New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-511229-6

⁴ Barnes, R. C. (2006) "Science, Freemasonry and the Third Millennium" *ANZMRC Proceedings* 2006

would, if removed, materially alter the basis of Freemasonry⁵. There is a problem however in that there is little agreement between Masonic Jurisdictions as to what are the Antient Landmarks. Some Jurisdictions have listed what they regard as the Antient Landmarks; Mackey and others have attempted to list them⁶. The United Grand Lodge of England and this Jurisdiction have not listed what they regard as Landmarks; what can be written, can be changed. John Hamill, Director of Special Projects of UGLE, in a recent article⁷, using Harry Carr's definition, has proposed six Landmarks, viz:

1. Belief in the Supreme Being, that being the one thing, in a very disparate membership, that we all have in common.
2. The presence of the three great lights, particularly the Volume of the Sacred Law, which underpins our system of morality.
3. The three great principles of brotherly love, relief and truth, they being the embodiment of our basic principles and tenets.
4. The use of ritual using allegory and symbolism, as well as the allusions within the ritual to King Solomon's temple, but not the detail of the ritual itself, which has changed over time.
5. The ban on the discussion of religion and politics at Masonic meetings, which if it were removed would undoubtedly lead to dissension and disharmony.
6. The taking of an obligation to uphold the principles of Freemasonry and to preserve inviolate the signs, tokens and words used as a test of membership.

Notice that none of these Landmarks requires another for its justification all are separate and stand alone. They are atomic in the sense of being indivisible, from the Greek atomos, that which cannot be split.

Since these statements are given in the context of Freemasonry, for the purposes of this paper they will be considered true, that is understood as is, in the context of a constructivist epistemology.

MASONIC UNDERSTANDING AND KNOWLEDGE

Any thoughtful Freemason soon learns that the understanding to be gained from the Charges delivered during his Initiation, Passing and Raising will grow and develop over time. In fact during his cognitive development, the mature Freemason will come to realise how much more he still has to learn. The knowledge contained in these early Charges is just the seedbed for the maturation of the Freemason's mind. The understanding of the deeper meanings of a Charge will grow as the Charge is heard over and over again, and especially when the individual Freemason gets to actually deliver the Charge in open Lodge. As the Freemason learns more lessons in other Masonic Orders, so his knowledge will grow as the loose ends begin to recombine.

Entered Apprentices will often ask, "why don't you read the Charges directly from the ritual?". And of course, the answer is that understanding comes from learning to recite the Charge from memory. The Charge is as much for the benefit of the one delivering it as for the candidate.

So if we accept that Masonic knowledge develops and grows with Masonic experience, how much does a Freemason really know? Further, since the understanding of each Freemason will grow and develop at different rates depending on the ceremonies they witness and participate in, can we say for certain whether there is one generally accepted body of Masonic knowledge? But

⁵ Carr, H., "Landmarks, Tenets and Principles" in *The Freemason at Work*, Lewis Masonic, 1992

we know from our own experience and discussions with other Freemasons, that this notion is untrue: there is a core knowledge about Freemasonry to which most Freemasons would assent.

ACCIDENTS AND ESSENCE

Perhaps this is because Freemasonry has essential properties and accidental properties, in the Aristotelean sense. That is, what Freemasonry is at its essence, these would be those things which the late Harry Carr suggested that would, were it removed, materially alter the basis of Freemasonry, that is our Antient Landmarks.

This now leads us to ask what are the accidents of Freemasonry? In a philosophical sense the essence of a chair is something to sit upon; its accidents include, inter alia, the material it is made from, its design features, its colour. Freemasonry is practised all over the world, but well-travelled Freemasons will know that the ritual varies very much from Masonic jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In some cases it might just be the odd word, or where the Lodge Chaplain sits; in other cases, there might be significant differences in ritual. Lodges in the Western Australian Constitution work with one ritual; Lodges under the United Grand Lodge of England work with several rituals, including Emulation, Taylors, West End, etc.

PARADIGM SHIFTS

This last paragraph implies that our rituals are not essential, but accidental. Most Masonic jurisdictions will have a Rituals and Ceremonial Committee which oversees the ritual to be used by Lodges. In a paper presented by the Supreme Council 33° of the AASR Australia to the Conference of European and Associated Supreme Councils held in May 2003 in Capetown⁸ they say:

Coming now to the *internal* aspect, it must be recognised that, ultimately, ***the primary purpose of the Rite – and indeed of the Craft and of every Order of Freemasonry (author's emphasis) – is the education of its members to become better men and citizens.*** It is this aim which must dominate all organisational thinking and decisions, and which must then direct all actions in shaping the meetings and ceremonials of Rose Croix Chapters and Grand Elect Knight Kadosh Councils.

The implication being that our rituals are organic and capable of responding to the needs of the Craft, its members and the times.

A paradigm shift according to Thomas Kuhn⁹ is a change in the basic assumptions, or paradigms, within the ruling theory of science. Unlike a normal scientist, Kuhn held, "a student in the humanities has constantly before him a number of competing and incommensurable solutions to these problems, solutions that he must ultimately examine for himself". This is not to say that there could ever be a paradigm shift concerning the Antient Landmarks, however, the development of our rituals, laws and procedures must be considered in this context.

In 2012, a new Constitution was proposed to the membership of the Grand Lodge of Western Australia. What this tells us is that the legal structure of a Grand Lodge is subject to review and amendment.

In 1863, one Prosonno Coomar Dutt applied to become a Freemason to his local Lodge in Calcutta. However, the District Grand Lodge of Bengal did not feel that Hindus and Muslims

were “eligible for admission into the Mysteries and privileges of Freemasonry on any ground whatsoever.” Mr. Dutt wanted to become a Freemason and undaunted by his rejection, wrote to the Earl of Zetland, the Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England. The opinion of the Grand Master was that there was no prohibition against membership for “anyone who professed a belief in the Great Architect of Heaven and Earth and who was in any other respects worthy to be admitted into the Order.” Brother Dutt’s perseverance paid off: in 1872, Bro P C Dutt was initiated, passed and raised in Anchor and Hope Lodge in Calcutta. He later rose to become Deputy District Grand Master of Bengal¹⁰.

What this story tells us is that the accepted paradigm within the District Grand Lodge of Bengal was capable of being shifted by wiser authority.

Only recently the Craft in Western Australia has changed “swearing” to “sincerely and solemnly promise”. 50 years ago a gay man would not be considered for Lodge membership; in these more enlightened times, there are a number of openly gay men who are Freemasons.

The Craft can change both to ritual and process to reflect our times – there is still a part of another degree that many find offensive, hopefully, this too will change.

John Hamill¹¹ recently wrote:

First, Freemasonry has always been free from dogma. Grand Lodge having agreed on the basic form of our ceremonies, after the union in 1813, then stood back from it, except for major principles such as the former physical penalties in the obligations, and has never entered into a discussion as to what the meaning of the ritual is. This has been done in the firm belief that it is part of the individual’s personal journey to form their own understanding of the ritual. In addition, were the Grand Lodge to define the landmarks, that would be the first step on the road to establishing dogma.

Secondly, in addition to finding his own meaning of the ritual, discovering the landmarks surely forms part of the individual’s journey, providing an opportunity to make his own study and increase his own understanding of the Craft.

CONCLUSION

This last paragraph of John Hamill is significant. It is the responsibility of the individual Freemason to create his own understanding of the Craft. It implies that each Freemason may well understand the Craft that is unique to them. There is no “one size fits all”.

Returning to our definition of science above and with some paraphrasing, viz:

Science is a body of knowledge about the individual Freemason (who is a part of the Universe), together with a self-critical system of attempting to understand himself, and a collection of rigorous methods to test hypotheses developed from observations of oneself and others, and oneself’s and other’s behaviour.

Freemasonry may be seen as a progressive science as far as the individual Freemason is concerned. Freemasonry is a body of knowledge; it is necessarily self-critical if the Freemason is diligent in his studies, and emphasises daily advancement of Masonic knowledge; it is open to the use of rigorous methods to test the individual’s hypotheses about the Craft. As the Freemason progresses through the Craft and through the other Orders, so his body of knowledge

will expand and increase; he will become the better able to examine critically and in a scientific manner our beloved Craft.

- 1 James, C L R “Beyond a Boundary”, Serpent’s Tail, 1963
- 2 www.sciencecouncil.org/definition
- 3 Heilbron, J. L. (editor-in-chief) (2003). *The Oxford Companion to the History of Modern Science*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-511229-6.
- 4 Barnes, R. C. (2006) “Science, Freemasonry, and the Third Millenium” *ANZMRC Proceedings* 2006.
- 5 Carr, H., “Landmarks, Tenets and Principles” in *The Freemason at Work*, Lewis Masonic, 1992
- 6 Jantz, P., “The Landmarks of Freemasonry”, <http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/landmarks.html>
- 7 Hamill, J., “John Hamill on the Landmarks of Freemasonry”, *Freemasonry Today*, March 2015
- 8 Paper submitted by The Supreme Council 33o AASR for Australia to be presented at the Conference of European and Associated Supreme Councils, Capetown, May 2003
- 9 Kuhn, T S, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Third Edition)*, The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- 10 Dutt, P C, *How Hindus were Admitted into the Mysteries of Freemasonry*, K P Mookerjee & Co, 1905
- 11 Hamill, J., “John Hamill on the Landmarks of Freemasonry”, *Freemasonry Today*, March 2015