

MASONIC MUSINGS

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Welcome to *Issue Seventeen*, the fifth for 2014. In this Edition I print the excellent paper given at *The Holden Research Circle* in Melbourne on 3rd October 2014, by Bro Dr Thomas Mikeska. Enjoy!

Fraternal regards,
Kent Henderson.

A Matter of Black and White

1. INTRODUCTION

The mosaic pavement or checkerboard is not only a central piece of the lodge room but also a fundamental and central part of the First Degree Tracing Board. This short study aims to shed some light onto the philosophical implications of the checkerboard as a symbol and the valuable lessons it might hold in place for the path through life of a Freemason.

2. THE CHECKERBOARD

The checkerboard – Two sides of a coin

From the ‘Explanations of the First Degree Tracing Board’ we learned that the interior of a Freemasons’ lodge is composed of ornaments, furniture and jewels [1]. The group of ornaments consists of the mosaic pavement or checkerboard, the blazing star and the tessellated border. The checkerboard has the form of a rectangle and is build of white and black squares; the white and black squares are organised in alternate order like the white and black squares on a chessboard. The ‘Explanations of the First Degree Tracing

Board’ provides already an idea of the wider meaning of the pattern of white and black squares by noting that: “This [the pattern of white and black squares] points out the diversity of objects which decorate and adorn the creation, the animate as well as the inanimate parts thereof.” [1,2].

The term inanimate leaves room for multiple interpretations and allows to see the pattern of white and black squares as a symbolical representation of the opposite sides of a coin: day and night, light and darkness, good and evil, love and hate, peace and war, birth and death, right and wrong to name only a few examples. Even if we tend to have a certain preference for one side of the coin, the important message is, that opposite sides have the same value. Without the one side we cannot understand the other side. Would we understand love if we would not know that hate exists? Would we understand light without knowing what darkness is? The answer is simply ‘no’.

Human nature tends to avoid sides which can be related to negative feelings or situations. However, they are often considered negative because they make us leave our comfort zone. We also often believe that a good life can be defined as a life without any obstacles, problems or challenges. However, it still remains to be proven that this assumption is correct. Nevertheless, we can learn from our mistakes and grow on our challenges. In other words the 'negative' side of the coin contains something positive and both sides reveal their same importance. But it is also true that 'positive' sides can harbour a negative seed. What is sometimes done with a good intention might result in a negative outcome. The relationship between both sides is displayed in the Ying-Yang symbol (Figure 1). Both aspects are interwoven, are of equal importance and contain the seed of the opposite aspect. Moreover, the Ying-Yang symbol beautifully expresses also the idea that one side is not complete without the other side. Consequently, to visualise the equality of opposite sides the checkerboard of a lodge room should be made from the same number of white and black squares.

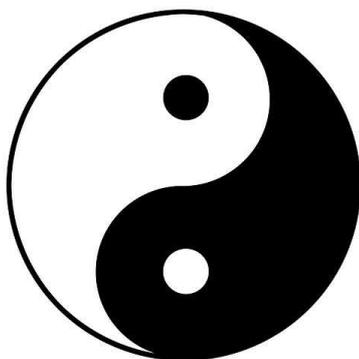


Figure 1: The Ying-Yang symbol.

The checkerboard – Journey through life

The checkerboard is also a mirror of our life here on earth. The walk over the white and black squares resembles our journey through life. Our journey through life will not always be on the nice and sunny side but also through times of darkness. This interpretation comes from a section in 'The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry', where it reads: "As the steps of man are trod in the various and uncertain incidents of life, and his days are variegated and chequered by a strange contrariety of events, his passage through this existence, though sometimes attended by prosperous circumstances, is often beset by a multitude of evils; tomorrow we may trotter on the uneven paths of weakness, temptation, and adversity." [2].

This idea is further explored in the First Degree Tracing Board. The endless number of different ways a man can take through his life is illustrated by the checkerboard which extends beyond the altar in the East without showing a clear ending. This endless extension is also seen in the North and South where the checkerboard vanishes in a darkened and blurred background (Figure 2). However, the checkerboard is also displayed in the Tracing Boards of the Second and Third Degree (Figure 2). This further illustrates that white and black squares will always be on our way through life until our last hour.



Figure 2: Set of Tracing Boards by John Harris from 1825. Left: First Degree Tracing Board. Middle: Second Degree Tracing Board. Right: Third Degree Tracing Board [3].

Importantly, whatever way we will take through life, every square will contribute and shape our personality and the person we are. This important message is reflected by the tessellated border as a surrounding of both, the checkerboard of the lodge room as well as the First Degree Tracing Board. It puts the white and black squares into a frame and binds and holds them together.

The checkerboard – Which way to go?

During the First Degree ceremony we were placed in the Northeast corner of the checkerboard in the lodge room. Our new life as a Freemason is placed in front of us. However, we have been placed at the boundary between darkness and light. It is now our choice (and free will) to stay either in darkness (or the dark side) or light [NOTE: In the northern hemisphere the sun is never seen in the north and can be therefore associated with darkness. The sun rises in the East. The Northeast corner is therefore the

region which sits between darkness and light].

It shows that it is up to us how we walk through our life. It is our decision to do good or bad. The First Degree ceremony provides us with the necessary ideas and tools to help us to find a right way through our life. As this is the predominant topic of the First Degree it is not surprising that the checkerboard forms an integral part of the First Degree Tracing Board. This is not necessarily obvious as its presence is overshadowed by other items displayed in the Tracing Board. However, this characteristic reflects quite well into our life as it is not always recognised that we make every minute decisions which determine our way through life, or in a more symbolic character, our way on the white and black squares.

We can make good decisions and bad decisions and we can do things in a right way or a wrong way. But how do we define right

or wrong? This question is not easily answered as right or wrong can strongly depend on societies in general, political and religious systems or cultural backgrounds. However, the answer in section of the ‘The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry’ mentioned above explains further: “Then while such emblems are before us, we are morally instructed not to boast of anything, but to give heed to our ways, to walk uprightly and with humility before God, there being no station in life on which pride can with stability founded; for though some are born to more elevated situations than others, yet, when in the grave, we are all on the same level, death destroying all distinctions; and while our feet tread on this Mosaic work, let our ideas recur to the original whence we copy; let us, as good men and Masons, act as the dictates of reason prompt us, to practise charity, maintain harmony, and endeavour to live in unity and brotherly love.” [2].

This section or answer provides already some sort of assistance and guidance about what is right and wrong. Further guidance is provided by the symbolic association of the four corners or tassels of the checkerboard with the four cardinal virtues. This association is referenced in the ‘Explanations of the First Degree Tracing Board’, where it reads: “Pendent to the corners of the lodge are four tassels meant to remind us of the four cardinal virtues, namely: Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice, the whole of which, tradition informs us, were constantly

practised by a great majority of our ancient brethren.” [1]. The four cardinal virtues are timeless and are probably inherent to the nature of human beings and also the driving forces of the ‘inner moral compass’.

3. THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

The four cardinal virtues, namely Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice have been regarded by many philosophers throughout history as the most important and highly valued virtues or principles. These fundamental principles are considered the foundation for all other virtues. Adherence to the cardinal virtues results in habits which shape and underlie the character of a good person. In the following sections I will briefly discuss the four cardinal virtues and their meaning in our daily life.

3.1 Temperance

‘The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry’ defines temperance as “that due restraint of the passions and affections, which renders the body tame and governable, and relieves the mind from the allurements of vice.” [4]. Temperance can generally be regarded as self-control. The opposite of temperance is intemperance which can have many faces. The many faces of intemperance are not always immediately visible and are quite often well hidden in disguise. For example, gossip, defamation, manipulating phrases and inappropriate comments fall also under the umbrella of intemperance as they can be considered as an uncontrolled and excessive use of words or

the mouth. In general, intemperance and excessive episodes, regardless of and in what direction, bear always an imbalanced and destructive seed in it; modesty is key in any aspect for a balanced state and life.

3.2 Fortitude

Fortitude is defined in ‘The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry’ as “that noble and steady purport of the soul, which is equally distant from rashness and cowardice; it enables us to undergo any pain, labour, danger, or difficulty, when thought necessary; or deemed prudentially expedient.” [4]. Courage is probably the most appropriate term or habit associated with fortitude. This habit is not limited to face and stand our fears in times of uncertainty and hardship. It also applies to take responsibility for our mistakes and not to hide them cowardly under the carpet or to blame others. However, the most challenging situations to stand the test of courage are those where we have to stand up for what we believe in or to oppose injustice. This can be in particular challenging in those times and situations where terms such as tolerance and necessity have been blurred or used inappropriately to justify injustice or things which are not right.

3.3 Prudence

‘The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry’ define that prudence “teaches us to regulate our lives and actions according to the dictates of reason, and is that habit of mind whereby men wisely judge, and prudentially determine, all things relative to

their temporal and eternal happiness.” [4]. Prudence is probably best described as wisdom and insight. Reason, knowledge and careful observation are fundamental principles to determine and judge wisely any situation. The virtue of prudence applied in the true sense of the word, free of prejudice and egoistic forces, can help us clearly to determine and to distinguish right from wrong, appropriate from inappropriate and to take or recommend proper action to resolve disputes. A willingness of life-long learning and a desire to broaden one’s own knowledge in many diverse areas throughout life is essential to walk successfully on the path of wisdom.

3.4 Justice

A definition of justice in ‘The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry’ is given as “that station or boundary of right, by which we are taught to render to every man his just due, and that without distinction.” [4]. Unconditional fairness might be best to describe the principle of justice. This also implies that justice does not take gender, skin colour, race or religious beliefs (to name only a few) into consideration to resolve for example a dispute. Furthermore, personal networks or advantages also don’t have a place in the pure practice of justice. However, pure and applied justice is not to be mistaken by ‘justice’ imposed by ethical, moral, cultural or legal considerations determined by society, religious systems or government regulations or laws. As justice is one of the driving forces of the ‘inner moral compass’

true justice comes from a person's inside and is not restricted or regulated by external influences of any kind.

4. POSITIONS OF THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

As mentioned earlier, a section of 'The Lectures of the Three Degrees in Craft Freemasonry' associates the four cardinal virtues with the four corners or tassels of the checkerboard of the lodge room. However, no information is provided if a certain cardinal virtue is specifically associated with a certain checkerboard corner or tassel.

Nevertheless, in this regards we find two major concepts repeatedly discussed in the

Masonic literature. The first concept associates the four cardinal virtues with a certain corner or tassel according to the 'Perfect Points of Entrance' whereas the other concept draws an association in the context of speculations on Operative Freemasonry (Table 1). Interestingly, it looks like that an association between the four cardinal virtues and the four tassels or corners of the checkerboard has not been mentioned at early stages of Speculative Freemasonry but might have evolved or has been recognised at later stages. However, this interesting topic goes beyond the scope of this study and the interested reader is referred elsewhere [5,6].

Table 1: Associations between cardinal virtues and tassels or corners of the checkerboard.

	Association in the context of:	
Cardinal Virtue:	'Perfect Points of Entrance'	Operative Freemasonry
Temperance	Northwest	Southeast
Fortitude	Northeast	Southwest
Prudence	Southeast	Northwest
Justice	Southwest	Northeast

5. CONCLUSIONS

When we were placed in the Northeast corner of the checkerboard during our First Degree ceremony the different facets and endless possibilities of our own life were placed in front of us by just looking at the white and black squares. It is our decision which way we want to take over the white and black squares. Surely, sometimes decisions are not in our hands and steps and

phases of our life will definitively be attended by dark times. However, again, it is our decision how we walk through those difficult and unpleasant times.

The four cardinal virtues, namely Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice are fundamental principles on our path through life. They can be considered as the driving forces of our 'inner moral compass'.

The 'inner moral compass' has the capacity to provide guidance in our decision making processes. Adherence to the directions provided by the 'inner moral compass', should be driven by an understanding that the underlying principles are worth following. There is no point in following those principles out of fear for punishment in this or an afterlife. Adherence to and practising of those virtues in our daily life of our own free

will and accord, and from the heart, will certainly help to shape our personal character in a good way.

6. FOOD FOR THOUGHTS

I) How do you see the white and black squares in your life? **II)** Review your day. Can you identify situations which relate to the four cardinal virtues? Did you adhere to the underlying principles? **III)** Contemplate the concept of the 'inner moral compass'.

7. REFERENCES

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