

To learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry.

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Two infinitives; one lesson, no commas.

The second question in the Entered Apprentice Exam is “What came you here to do?” The correct response is “To learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry.”

While this seems like a straight-forward query and response, for the past several decades, there has been a raging debate among some Masonic scholars as to whether or not there be a comma between the infinitive phrases “to learn” and “to subdue my passions.” Now to some, this may seem like a pointless argument not unlike the mediaeval conundrum about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but I assure you, the comma can make a difference.

To illustrate, I will borrow an example from a lodge education report delivered by my good friend Brother Cameron Poe to Lexington Lodge #1. In his report, Cameron told the brethren about a popular catalog for silly trinkets and clever clothing that he was paging through when he came across a sweatshirt that said “Commas Save Lives”. It was accompanied by the two phrases, “Let’s eat, Grandma.” And “Let’s eat Grandma”. Without the comma, the second sentence becomes a cannibalistic imperative to dine on grandma, rather than a polite invitation for grandma to come to supper. Clearly, commas matter!

The reason some Masons advocate for the comma is to highlight the importance of education for self-improvement in Freemasonry. Not surprisingly, they argue that the primary way that Freemasonry makes good men better is through Masonic education. What probably happened was that one day, a zealous over-achieving Lodge Education Officer decided to add the comma to set apart the infinitive phrase “to learn” on its own, and thereby elevate its (and his) importance. After all, if the main reason a poor blind candidate becomes a Mason is “to learn,” then, it must be a Lodge Education Officer’s mission “to teach!” So by the innovation of a little punctuation, the Lodge Education Officer’s central role in Freemasonry was firmly established!

When we disconnect the phrase “to learn” from “to subdue my passions”, however, we generalize the type of learning that a candidate is intended to derive from his Masonic experience. A generic imperative “To learn” could as easily be a command to learn about planning for one’s retirement as anything else. An open invitation to learn about general things is vastly different from an imperative to learn about a system of moral instruction. Frankly, I think that one of my missions in life is “to learn” regardless of my membership in a Masonic Lodge, and I did not seek to become a Freemason simply “to learn”; rather, I became a Freemason to learn more about its unique philosophy which forms the intellectual foundation upon which our great nation was built.

So does that little comma belong between those two infinitives? To find out the answer, I first looked to our ritual. The most definitive answer to this vexing question is in Ohio's Typewritten Ritual, wherein there is no comma in the reply to the question "What came you here to do?" So in Ohio at least, that settles the question: there is no comma—period.

As we progress through the degrees, we find more evidence to support the absence of a comma. In explaining the Great Lights of Freemasonry, the Master informs every newly enlightened Entered Apprentice that the Compasses are given to us "to circumscribe our desires and **keep our passions within due bounds** with all mankind." As the candidate progresses in search of further Light, he is informed in the Fellow Craft Lecture that "BY SPECULATIVE MASONRY, **we learn to subdue the passions**, act upon the square, keep a tongue of good report, maintain secrecy and practice charity. And in his ultimate quest for more Light in the Master Mason degree, the Master reveals that "both points of the Compasses are elevated above the Square, which is to teach you never to lose sight of the **moral application** of this valuable instrument, by which we are taught to circumscribe our desires, **and keep our passions within due bounds with all mankind.**" No mention of a generic imperative "to learn" appears here or in any other part of our ritual in Ohio.

The ritual in many jurisdictions aligns with what we find in Ohio. But curiously, some jurisdictions, like North Dakota, insert a comma following "to learn." If we go back to some of the earliest exposures of Masonic rituals, however, they all lack the offending comma, which makes me suspect that North Dakota's comma may be a modern innovation.

In one of the earliest American exposures, *The Mysteries of Freemasonry*, revealed by the infamous Captain William Morgan, we find the question "What comest thou hither to do?" being answered by "To learn to subdue my passions, and improve myself in the secret arts and mysteries of Ancient Freemasonry."

If we go back even further to that most famous early exposure of Freemasonry, Prichard's *Masonry Dissected*, we get this poetic response to the question "What do you come here to do?"

Not to do my own proper Will,
But to subdue my Passion still;
The Rules of Masonry in hand to take,
And daily Progress therein make.

And finally, if we examine the Emulation ritual, which is one of the most prevalent workings used by lodges of the United Grand Lodge of England—the mother jurisdiction of all Freemasonry—we find the question "Since you bring nothing but hearty good wishes, what do you come here to do?" answered by "To learn to rule and subdue my passions, and make a further progress in Masonry." Again, no comma.

In conclusion, it is clear from these passages that there ought naught be a comma between "to learn" and "to subdue."

Which all begs the question . . . why is the presence or absence of a comma so important? Does it matter if it's "To learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry" or "To learn, to subdue my passions, and improve myself in Masonry."? Well, actually, yes, it matters quite a bit. And the key to why it matters is in the Master's admonition that we, as Master Masons, must never lose sight of the ***moral application of the compasses***, which is the valuable instrument by which we are taught to circumscribe our desires, and keep our passions within due bounds with all mankind." That, my brethren, is the core philosophical teaching of Freemasonry – period (but again, *no comma*)!

And to understand the importance of the ***moral application of the compasses***, we need to go back to the formative years of Freemasonry. Setting aside the romantic mythology of cathedral builders and the Knights Templar, Modern Speculative Freemasonry is a child of its times. The first documented *Free-Masonic* initiations are Elias Ashmole in 1646, and Robert Moray in 1641. From these initiations, and the nature of the men initiated, it can be reasonable inferred that Speculative Freemasonry was active in the early 17th Century, placing it at the very beginning of the Age of the Enlightenment (1620s to 1780s). Ashmole and Moray were great minds of science and learning, both being founding members of the Royal Society, so it is reasonable to infer that Freemasonry in the 17th Century would also have been intimately related with Enlightenment philosophy if it attracted men such as Ashmole and Moray, who were also animated by the same philosophy and passion for learning. And if we accept this as true, then it would be reasonable to examine Enlightenment philosophy in detail to try to make sense of our Masonic ritual.

Freemasonry is often described as *a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols*. Up until this time, the basis for all morality in Europe was Christianity and the Holy Bible. And in other lands, the prevailing religion formed the basis of morality for other peoples, with the unfortunate result being that while every culture had a moral code, each code was based on its own exclusive sectarian religious belief that was not transferrable from one culture to the other. On the contrary, the difference in beliefs often led to conflict, murder, and even genocide. What humanity needed was a moral code that was not dependent on sectarian religion and could therefore be accepted as equally authoritative by all. Deriving such a moral code was a core mission of Enlightenment philosophy, and arguably the Enlightenment philosopher with the greatest impact in this endeavor was Benedict Spinoza.

Spinoza proposed that the foundation for morality is virtue and reason, and this understanding is *the key* Enlightenment philosophy. Spinoza developed his moral code in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*ⁱ, first published anonymously in 1670 by Jan Rieuwertsz in Amsterdam, and disparaged as "a book forged in hell", and the *Ethics*ⁱⁱ, which was considered so heretical for its day, was not published until after Spinoza's death in 1677. In these works, Spinoza explains that men can never be entirely free from their passions, but they can learn to achieve some degree of autonomy and freedom from their turmoil to the extent that they are activated and guided by reason. The ideal of the free, rational individual presented in Spinoza's *Ethics* provides a model for a virtuous human life liberated from irrational passions.

If there is one theme that runs throughout all of Spinoza's writings, it is the liberation from bondage, whether psychological, political, or religious. Spinoza's *Ethics* and *Theologico-Political Treatise* are part of the same overall philosophical and political project in which he sought to liberate the minds of individuals from superstition in the former, and the lives of citizens from ecclesiastic authority in the latter. His goal was a tolerant democratic society of individuals whose deeds are guided by the true (moral) religion. At the time that he wrote, however, this philosophy was both heretical and treasonous, and it denied the religious authority of the priest, and by implication, the divine right of the King to rule.

I believe that it is Spinoza's understanding of the role that reason plays in providing a universal basis for all morality that lies at the core of Masonic philosophy and ritual, which also helps explain why secrecy was so important to our early brethren.

To understand why the imperative "to learn to subdue my passions" is so important, we must first understand what Freemasonry means by the word "passions." It does not mean emotions like lust, greed, anger, and hate. Hopefully, we, as good men, learned to control such base passions long before we first knocked on the door of Freemasonry. Rather, in the context of Freemasonry, "passions" are irrational beliefs that imprison the minds of men, and prevent them from living a life of virtue in harmony with their fellow men. According to Spinoza, the remedy for such a life mired in the passions lies in virtue, that is, in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

In the case of the *Ethics*, it is freedom from irrational passions such as hope and fear and the superstitious beliefs and actions to which they give rise. The free individual described in the *Ethics* acts from knowledge, not emotion. In the *Treatise*, Spinoza makes an extended plea for freedom in the civic realm: freedom of thought and expression, and especially freedom of philosophizing and freedom of religion. These latter two freedoms are not to be confused with each other: one regards the pursuit of truth, while the other is about encouraging moral behavior.

The *Ethics* and the *Treatise* thus complement each other. To the extent that a person becomes more free as an individual and more rational in his beliefs, the less likely he is to fall prey to superstition and indenture himself to religious sectarians. And the more a state is liberated from ecclesiastic influence and governed by liberal democratic principles, the more freedom there will be for citizens to engage in philosophy and discover the truths that will liberate their minds.

According to Spinoza, true religion—as opposed to sectarian religion—is about nothing more than moral behavior. It is not what you believe but what you do that matters. This philosophy is beautifully captured by *The Old Charges of Free and Accepted Masons*, first published by John Anderson.

A Mason is oblig'd, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid atheist, nor an irreligious libertine. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be good Men an true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd; whereby Masonry becomes the Centre of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain'd at a perpetual Distance.

What Spinoza wants to see is a politics of hope (for a heavenly reward) and fear (of eternal punishment) be replaced by a politics of reason, virtue, freedom, and moral behavior.

“It is the fundamental purpose of democracy to avoid the follies of appetite and to keep men within the bounds of reason, as far as possible, so that they may live in peace and harmony.”

The republican tradition tends to emphasize the role of the state in modeling good citizens, and sometimes even in making them into good people. In effect, Spinoza is saying that the role of a republican democracy is to make good men better. Sound familiar?

The ideas of Spinoza's *Treatise* inspired republican revolutionaries in England, America, and France. To the extent that we are committed to the ideal of a secular society free of ecclesiastic influence and governed by toleration, liberty, and a conception of civic virtue; and insofar as we think of true religious piety as consisting of treating other human beings with dignity and respect, we are the heirs of Spinoza's scandalous treatise, which when boiled down to is fundamental core teaches us **to learn to subdue our passions**. And that is why it is critical for us to not let a comma get in the way!

ⁱ Commentary on Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* are derived from *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, by Steven Nadler, Princeton University Press, © 2011. Further citations are omitted.

ⁱⁱ Commentary on Spinoza's *Ethics* are derived *Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics*, by Steven B. Smith, Yale University Press, © 2003. Further citations are omitted.