



UGLE Oration

Nature and Science

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What do we mean by 'nature & science'?

Summary

What do we mean by 'nature & science'? The answer is found in that period of history known as 'the Renaissance'.

Keywords

Second-Degree, Passing, Nature & Science, Researches

Nature and Science

When you were passed to the Second Degree, you were informed that you are now permitted to extend your research into the hidden mysteries of nature and science. What does this mean? Please be reassured, we are not expecting you to enrol for a master's degree in molecular biology or quantum mechanics, unless, of course, you want to!

To understand the expression 'the hidden mysteries of nature and science' and its significance to Freemasonry, we need to step back to that extraordinary period of European history known as the Renaissance, literally meaning 'rebirth'. Although associated with the works of some of the world's greatest artists, such as Leonardo and Michelangelo, this period, which roughly encompassed the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, was in fact a time of very great struggle and turbulence. Thus, there were numerous wars and territorial struggles and the great schism within the Christian church, but it was also a time of enormous intellectual strife.

In the early part of this period, strenuous attempts were made to rediscover knowledge and wisdom supposedly laid down by great thinkers in a bygone Golden age of thought and inspiration. In the field of medicine for example, the writings of the anatomist Galen and the Muslim physician-philosopher Avicenna were accorded almost divine infallibility. Galileo was forced to retract his work on the solar system on threat of torture, because his findings stepped outside the received wisdom of the church which held that the centre of the universe was the Pope's throne, or cathedra, in Rome. To the early Renaissance academics, certain natural phenomena were strictly out of bounds for study, they were the hidden or 'occult' mysteries of nature and science. Thomas Aquinas, regarded by many as the greatest thinker in the church at that time, even regarded magnetism as an occult force to be left well alone!

In the early days of the 16th century, an extraordinary figure strode on to this intellectual scene - a short, ugly, cantankerous fellow with the splendid name of Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. More usually known by his pseudonym Paracelsus, he was a doctor and a chemist and made enormous strides in both fields, setting the stage for a move from magical remedies to rational pharmacology and from alchemy to chemistry. The reason for his enduring renown was his aggressive rebellion against the concept of received wisdom from ages past and his insistence on experiment, observation and deduction. Unfortunately, his irascible conduct and his inability to suffer fools gladly made him many enemies and it has often been remarked that he was lucky to have escaped with his life on many an occasion.

Like Socrates before him, Paracelsus urged his students, much to the anger of the senior university figures who he dubbed 'high asses', never to blindly believe received wisdom, but to use their own facilities of reason, experimentation, observation and deduction. His philosophy was summed up by his remark that '*If I want to prove anything I shall not do so by quoting authorities, but by experiment and by reasoning thereupon*'.

Eventually, so enraged did he become of the reverential awe accorded to the authority accorded to received wisdom that in 1527, on the Festival of St John, he took the University of Basel's precious copy of Avicenna's Medical Canon from the library and threw it on the festive bonfire. Not a good career move! He was hounded out of the city, but he had made a strong and much needed point, and the Renaissance was never the same again.

Though perhaps just coincidence, this act of defiance took place 190 years to the very day before the foundation of the first Grand Lodge, at the Goose and Gridiron pub in London in 1717. What is not a coincidence is that the guiding influence on the evolution of Freemasonry both before and after this date has been its emphasis, in the spirit of Paracelsus, on free thinking and on an escape from the tyranny of oppression of ideas. To the early Mason there were no forbidden paths of enquiry, and this is the case today. On the contrary, we are encouraged, within the constraint of the principles of morality, to pursue the paths of enquiry wherever they take us, even to the throne of God himself. So researching the hidden mysteries of nature and science does not mean hours of study, it simply means having an open and enquiring mind and not accepting anything without the use of your reason.

This open and unfettered spirit of Freemasonry is nicely expressed by a dialogue between two Zen Masters: -

- Joshu asked the teacher Nansen, 'What is the true Way?'
Nansen answered, 'Everyday way is the true way'.
- Joshu asked, 'Can I study it?'
Nansen answered, 'The more you study, the further from the Way'.
- Joshu asked, 'If I don't study it, how can I know it?'
Nansen answered, 'The Way does not belong to things seen: nor to things unseen. It does not belong to things known: nor to things unknown. Do not seek it, study it, or name it. To find yourself on it, open yourself as wide as the sky'.

##END##

Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (*in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself*)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary.

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (*in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand*).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*.
Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

For further papers and other learning materials visit "Solomon" at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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