

## Chapter 9: Developing the Philosopher-king's Character – The Four Cardinal Virtues

Central to Freemasonic Ritual is the study of the Four Cardinal Virtues. Plato did not name them “cardinal virtues”. This term was something that arose much later developing its suite of Christian interpretation during the Middle Ages.

We will have a look at what the term actually means.

The word cardinal is derived from the Latin *cardo*. *Cardo* means simply a *hinge* or a *pivot*. The idea in using this word was to emphasise that for a human life to have any meaning or value, that life needs to be pivoted or hinged against these four virtues.

The word virtue is derived from the Latin word, *vir*. *Vir* is Latin for man and by extension, manliness or strength. The Greeks though, had a very different interpretation of the ideal of virtue and it is this Greek interpretation that concerns us most at this stage.

The Greek term for virtue was *arête*. *Arête* means *excellence* – possibly even something more – *habitual excellence*. It is important to note that from the Greek perspective, virtue does not have any gender inflection like its Latin counterpart has. It was also broader in meaning and application.

Whatever field of human endeavour we are involved in, we each have the capacity of developing *excellence* in its fullest potential.

The Cardinal Virtues are known in English by the words Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice. We will have a look at each virtue in its English, Latin and Greek context to better appreciate what Plato was trying to impress upon us when he emphasised time and again, that no one has the capacity of developing into a philosopher-ruler unless these virtues are clearly demonstrated in their lives.

Before we do this though, let us have a look at the way that these virtues are *graphically* displayed within a lodge room.

When we enter a lodge room, one of the first things that our eye will be drawn to, is a feature that lies in the very *centre* of the room. It is what is known as the *Mosaic Pavement*. This Pavement is rectangular in shape and the tiles that compose the Pavement itself are coloured black against white. At each of the corners of this Pavement is the figure of a simple tassel. In a Masonic context, each of these four tassels is representative of each of the four Cardinal Virtues.

It is not a simple accident that the Mosaic Pavement lies in the centre of the lodge room. It is not a simple accident that the Pavement is rectangular in shape. It is not a simple accident that the Cardinal Virtues are depicted as occupying each of four points of the rectangle where the right angle is formed.

The design itself is mediaeval and represents the *spiritual nature* of a human being.

The Italian philosopher, linguist and novelist Umberto Eco, made a significant point in his book *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* when he explained that during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, ideas from the Pythagorean theory of the universe were adapted and developed into a concept known by the Latin term, *homo quadratus* (or the *four-squared man*). This “four-squared man” is the symbol of moral rectitude and it is this - the very concept that the Mosaic Pavement illustrates.

It was commonly believed...that the number four had some kind of special significance. There were four cardinal points, four winds, four phases of the moon, four seasons, four letters in the word 'Adam' and four was the constitutive number of Plato's tetrahedron which corresponded to fire... Four was the number of moral perfection and men experienced in the struggle for moral perfection were called 'tetragonal'.

*Umberto Eco, Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages, pp35-36*

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With this in mind, we can interpret the Mosaic Pavement as illustrating the *means* to achieve a moral outlook on life and the way to do it – is by means of the Four Cardinal Virtues!

Let us now examine each of these virtues in greater detail to see what lessons we can draw from them so that we can apply them in our lives to achieve greater personal fulfilment.

### Prudence:

The first Cardinal Virtue is Prudence. The Latin word is *prudentia* and it is easy to see the linguistic link between these two words. The Greek word is written like this: **φρονησις**. It is pronounced, *phro-ne-sis*.

There is a book of Greek philosophical terms that goes by the simple title of *Definitions*. While it was earlier attributed to Plato, modern opinion steers heavily *against* this claim. Regardless, it will come in handy for us to refer to on the grounds that the definitions applied to the terms were current in the *ancient* Greek world. This will then be our base line to understand what the terms meant when they were first developed.

The definition given to phronesis (prudence) is:

*practical wisdom; the knowledge of what is good and bad; the disposition by which we judge what is to be done and what is not to be done.*

The definition emphasises the very practical nature of what is meant by the word. In everyday terms, we might suggest that prudence is about the art of applying *common sense* in our day to day activities. This being the case, Plato was emphasising the importance of a thoughtful leader being able to use *common sense*. In this respect, common sense is not just a hunch” or a “gut-feeling”. It is a skill that we can each develop as a form of habitual excellence.

### Temperance:

The second Cardinal Virtue is temperance. The Latin word is *temperantia* and the Greek equivalent is **σωφροσύνη**. It is pronounced, *soph-ro-soon-ay*.

In an English language context, the word temperance has a very Victorian flavour. Temperance Unions (which were prominent during the Victorian era) were organisations whose objective was the abolition of liquor. In effect, they said “don’t drink gin”. The word can also mean something along the lines of “holding back”. In its own way, temperance doesn’t really hold up all that well in a positive light.

The ancient Greek definition was vastly different and hugely positive:

*Self control; moderation of the soul...good discipline in the soul; concord of the soul regarding ruling and being ruled.*

Self control is the most prized of virtues and it means not desiring to desire. It also means controlling the unfortunate self as much as possible when and if the regrettable happens and unconquerable desire does strike.

*Simon Goldhill, Love, Sex and Tragedy: Why Classics Matters.*

The operative ideas here are *balance* and *self control*. Instead of saying “don’t drink gin”, it suggests that gin *may* be a good thing to drink – *in moderation*. It suggests that an excess of anything is not really desirable.

It even suggests that *too much virtue* may be vice.

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In a practical sense, we could even say that this would be a good characteristic to have if we want to lose weight...the idea here is that we take in a balanced diet, don't overdo our calorie intake and ease up on alcohol consumption. The positive aspect of this definition is again its *practicality*. It is not requiring us to be ascetic...quite the opposite. It emphasises qualities like balance, order, stability. In this light, our focus in daily living is to achieve balance in the things that we *think*, in the things that we *feel* and in the things that we *do*. It is nothing short of harmonious alignment.

### Fortitude:

The third Cardinal Virtue is fortitude. The Latin word is *fortitudo* and the Greek word is written like this: **ανδρεία**. It is pronounced *and-ray-a*.

Terms like fortitude and courage have direct applications in a battlefield or some theatre of hostilities and it is often in those extreme situations that demonstrations of these qualities are usually observed.

The ancient Greek definition is somewhat subtler than what we've just discussed. The Greek definition says simply:

*...self-restraint in the soul about what is fearful and terrible; boldness in obedience to wisdom; calm in the soul about what correct thinking takes to be frightening.*

Here the definition focuses on the principle of balance yet again. This time the balance is associated with the ability to calm the rapid succession of thoughts that bewilder alarm or frighten us. It is more suggestive of being a call to calm but decisive action when circumstances demand it – irrespective of the dangers present. In these situations we have eliminated the *overactive* emotional aspects normally associated with danger. We see the danger for what it truly is, not for what our overactive imaginations embellish them to be.

Outside of being engaged in a theatre of war, the following situation which most of us have to face at some time in our lives expresses how we can demonstrate fortitude in an everyday situation.

Imagine having seen a medical specialist and having submitted to an array of tests. We are waiting for the results in the reception area of the specialist's offices. We are concerned that maybe the results will be terminal. We think a rapid succession of thoughts connected with dying and death. How will people react? What arrangements will need to be made for the disposal of our body? Is there life after death? If so, what is it like? We feel our heart race, our breathing become shallow and rapid. Justifiably - we feel faint.

The only positive thing available for us to do is to perform surgery on our thoughts...cut out those thoughts that are an elaboration on the circumstances we are facing, *now, today, this very instant*. We need to find that one point inside our spirit; that one still point in a universe that is wildly spinning out of control, and then stand with head held high as we are called into the specialist's room to hear the verdict, whatever that verdict may hold for us.

### Justice:

The fourth Cardinal Virtue is justice. The Latin word is *iustitia*, while the Greek word is written like this: **δικαιοσύνη**. It is pronounced *dik-eye-o-soon-ay*.

But the people who most deserve to be judged tough-minded are those who know exactly what terrors or pleasures lie ahead and are not turned away from danger by that knowledge.

*Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, 40 (Taken from On Justice, Power and Human Nature: Selections from The History of the Peloponnesian War, Translated by Paul Woodruff).*

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Earlier we touched on the modern translation of the word, saying that δικαιοσύνη was usually translated as justice, whereas the trend nowadays is to translate the word as "morality" or "ethical uprightness". Either way, the English word is flavoured with a court-like tone of punishment for wrong-doing.

In our discussion of the previous three Cardinal Virtues, we've noticed that the original Greek definition departs significantly from the common use of the words in English. The situation is no different when it comes to the word, justice.

The ancient Greek definition is: *the state that distributes to each person according to what is deserved*. The definition is simple with no elaboration whatsoever.

In this regard, the Greeks emphasised that morality, or justice or demonstrations of ethics had more to do with *responding to situations in the appropriate way*. As an example: if a person does well at something, the appropriate thing is to give them praise. If a person does poorly at a task, the appropriate thing is to counsel them, or train them or coach them (...or failing all these things), possibly even punish them.

Its importance to us is to apply the principle in such a way that we give to ourselves, to each person we meet and to each event in life that we are engaged in, a response that is *appropriate*.

In this regard, it is significant that in the Lodge Closing Ceremony, just before the Senior Warden sounds the gavel to close the lodge he remarks to all present, his specific function. It is to see that every brother has had what is due and owing to him.

Having discussed each of the four Cardinal Virtues, we can understand that as Freemasons we are called to demonstrate balance in every of our lives and nowhere is this instruction so clearly explained as in the Second Degree Working Tools Address:

*...to observe a due medium between avarice and profusion, to hold the scales of justice with equal poise, to make his passions and prejudices coincide with the just line of his conduct...*

The purpose behind this statement is simple. The purpose behind this illustrates the reason behind living a moral life that Plato emphasised in different ways throughout Republic. It is *assimilation to God*, or as our ritual poetically reminds us, to always *have eternity in view*.

The point is that the gods never neglect anyone who is prepared to devote himself to becoming moral and by practicing virtue to assimilate himself to God as much as is humanly possible.

*Plato: Republic, 613e  
Trans. Robin Waterfield*