

The Question of “Integrity” by Gaylord "Z" Thomas, 32°

“Masonry warns that a man can be a virtuous being and yet live an immoral life. Likewise, a man can have high morals and yet be an un-virtuous person. Is integrity a matter of action, or perception? Write an essay outlining your ideas about integrity in relationship to virtue and morality.”

When I read this question, I knew it was the one I wanted to answer as “integrity” has long been a “side study” of sorts for me as one of the Air Force’s three core values I taught to Air Force trainees being converted from civilian to military life in basic training, fully addressed as “Integrity First.” Additionally, the “square of virtue and morality” has long intrigued me as well, so the whole of this question was very attractive to me.

Integrity really is a rather large concept to get your arms around and understand and is too often not particularly well understood. We have a lot of phrases, like, “Don’t compromise your integrity,” but if we have trouble defining integrity, what do such phrases mean?

The word itself is rooted in a Latin word, *integritas*, and we see other words spring from this root, like integer, integrate, and integral.

Integer – whole or counting numbers, positive or negative (no fractions or parts).

Integrate – to make whole or complete, bringing parts together.

Integral – essential, whole or complete.

The main theme of the root is more easily understood as “whole” so when we say things like, “Don’t compromise your integrity,” we really mean, “Don’t weaken your whole self,” or in a more positive way, we say, “*Be yourself.*”

With this definition, I therefore share the understanding that people can be considered virtuous and yet immoral, or having high morals can still be un-virtuous, in total agreement with Masonry’s warning that a man can be either (and they are) – but a Mason of true integrity cannot be. We say that Masons should part on the square of virtue and morality (not on one or the other but rather a “balance” or square or crossing of the two).

Virtues include our Four Cardinal Virtues and allude to the guttural, pectoral, manual and pedal as we are taught in the Entered Apprentice Degree and those allude to other items. Yet, the idea that the guttural is related to the tongue (what we speak), the pectoral to the breast (what’s in our heart), the manual to the hands (reflecting what we do) and the pedal to the feet (where we go) can be drawn into this discussion easily as we address integrity as a matter of action or perception, and actually include both action and perception.

As we speak, we create impressions or perceptions among those who listen to us. Our words as well as our actions are the things that create the perceptions others have of us – and as well, our self-perception. The virtue associated here is temperance and is not so much an action, but a restraint from action such as vices (or the absence of virtues).

As we know what's in our heart better than any other person knows it, again, this is more of a perception issue than an action – except this issue does “drive” us to act in certain manners in certain situations. Fortitude is the virtue associated with the heart and while we can see that take shape in how someone reacts under various pressures, the root of it still lies within the individual and his own perception of himself.

What we do (with our hands) is our actions. In the Lodge, it has a very certain allusion to the position of our hands when we took the obligation. Taking the obligation is what we did in the Lodge. Living up to it is what we do outside the Lodge. And this is what this virtue – prudence – teaches, guiding us to regulate our actions.

The feet bring up an interesting virtue, that of justice, as the allusion to the feet is not so clearly connected. But again, where we go (and our feet take us there) creates a perception and if we go somewhere, it's usually for a purpose of some action that will follow. You go to a church to worship. You go to a restaurant to eat a meal. You go to a bar to drink liquor. The perception follows the action. But it is through the feet that we are grounded to the earth and on our two feet that we first experience the concept of balance which is not only a major Masonic concept we continually endeavor to master, but is central to the idea of justice, consistent and balanced between the laws of man as well as the Divine.

So, integrity as it relates to virtue alone is a matter of action AND perception and they are essentially linked. Our own perception of ourselves, for instance, will help us to follow through with certain actions. Our actions also create perceptions. They are considerably linked and from my own experience, know that some people's perceptions can often be their only view of reality.

And where we may broadly consider virtue to be acting on what is right, as perhaps God would have us act, we see a parallel in morality, but rather than by God's standard, it is man's standard of right and wrong that we use to measure (though our measuring is considerably more elastic). The virtues therefore remain constant while man's definition of morality may shift (even from one society or culture to another at the same time). Even in the same culture, we often do not agree on what is moral or immoral – each of us have our own opinions and we form our own exceptions to the ordinary rules of morality, and even those will shift within the individual, with new experiences and situations, even if slightly, through our own lives. This explains why modern morality may include previous immoralities – the difference being that the old immorality has simply, over time, become condoned. Makes you wonder if some things are truly moral just because our society tolerates, overlooks or excuses them.

The connection between virtue and morality would therefore be where the spiritual and earthly come together – on the square of the vertical spiritual aspect against the horizontal (flat) earth aspect. It is, indeed, tempting to go into a discussion here about the point within a circle as well and how we cannot materially err if we stay within the circumscribed area thereof, but perhaps it is better to let that topic remain something each of us will consider on our own time, always going back to those early lessons of the Craft to remind ourselves of so many basic lessons that remain concealed until or unless we do review them.

Integrity in relation to virtue and morality (for a Mason) is a higher standard of the whole of the two – squared. Virtue alone is good and there can be virtuous *men* who are yet immoral (we, as a Christian society, *may* consider Muslim Jihadists such – doing what they believe and understand their God has in mind for them while our society believes many of their actions to be highly immoral). On the flipside, there are likely many highly moral people – good people who do good things – right in our own society who do these things to please other people rather than out of any feeling or understanding of what their religious beliefs may say, even in contrast to those teachings on such issues as abortion, for example, though admittedly that particular example could be argued to have a “man made” (moral) standard rather than a Divine (virtuous) standard though some religions would argue the point – which makes the point of how closely virtue and morality are (or can be) inter-related and even confused with some people using one word interchangeably with the other.

The “whole” of the concepts of virtue and morality – the integrity of the two – is that it’s about both actions and perceptions, one driving the other circularly. And just as when one tells a lie, they usually end up telling more to cover the first (a sort of snowball effect), perceptions and self-perceptions drive actions and create new perceptions and, it continues. Clearly, it is better to be on the moral and virtuous side of this building than the opposite!

Indeed, one of the duties of the 21st degree is to be humble and modest, trusting in God (per “A Bridge to Light”). Squaring man-made standards against God-given natural laws of right and wrong reminds us of the Tower of Babel and also reminds us to remain tolerant of the views of others who may be more correct in their views than we are in ours – reminding us that only God knows for sure. What we may take from this, as well, is that man’s standards should remain “horizontal” and we should not stray into God’s domain beyond obeying His natural laws and putting our judgment above His. Perhaps the best way to do that is to balance our “moral” attitudes so that they never surpass (a new Tower of Babel) those of the spiritual and virtuous, keeping things in the proper perspective. We should also bear in mind that focusing on one likely comes at the expense of the other (which may result in a collapse), whereas together they build a better and stronger (less likely to collapse) understanding of both – squaring them perhaps to form something that will last as long as the Great Pyramids (the integrity of which we cannot question – think how long they’ve stood) which are built on a slope that apparently squares the horizontal and vertical in a matter of thinking, the same sort of slope that we would get if we graphically plotted out the square of increasing numbers.

A Mason has a thin line to walk to square the two. For us, it’s not good enough to merely be good (we came into Masonry at that level already); our aim is to be good for something and by aiming above morality, we can get there, through our actions as well as the perceptions we create along the way, never allowing a truce between virtue and morality. One without the other does not make a good Mason...a man of true integrity...whole.