

An Introductory and Philosophical Reconstruction of G.A.O.T.U for Freethinkers

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Introduction

A widely known fact about Anglo-based Freemasons, revealed clearly in Masonic websites, literature, and membership petition forms, is that one must believe in God or a Supreme Being in order to be initiated into the fraternity.¹ Certainly, despite the appeal of the Masons, centered around brotherhood, good will, charity, justice, and other honorable humanitarian virtues, this requirement has discouraged many atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers from pursuing an interest in the fraternity. There are varying instantiations of this “God” requirement in Masonic literature, but the following passages from varying Masonic sources (lodge websites and Masonic literature) convey the gist:

“MONOTHEISM is the sole dogma of Freemasonry. Belief in one God is required of every initiate...”

“Freemasonry requires that its members believe in God...”

“By definition, Freemasonry is a fraternal organization, religious in character, based on the principle of the Fatherhood of God...”

“The essential qualification for membership is a belief in a Supreme Being”

“Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for religion. It demands of its members a belief in a Supreme Being but provides no system of faith of its own.”

However, when you dig deeper into the “God” requirement, there arises a more interesting point, namely that Freemasons do not require a potential candidate to explain or clarify what he means by “Supreme Being,” “God,” or what we eventually see stated as “The Grand Architect of the Universe” (G.A.O.T.U) in Masonic literature. This was explained to me in person during the investigative stage of my application to become a Mason, when three men came to my home and asked me, among other questions, whether I believed in a Supreme Being. They asked the question, but before I answered they were quick to say that I didn’t have to explain or elaborate upon my belief. This qualification, or what I consider an “escape clause”, is also evident in Masonic literature, again, from the following passages of one particular Monitor:

“...but his conception of the Supreme Being is left to his own interpretation. Freemasonry is not concerned with theological distinctions.”

“...but [Freemasonry] leaves to each man the duty of defining Deity and has never accepted any dogmatic concept other than the Great Architect of the Universe”

One can also see the above described at wikipedia.org:

“Candidates for regular Freemasonry are required to declare a belief in a Supreme Being.[27] However, the candidate is not asked to expand on, or explain, his or her interpretation of Supreme Being.”

The first point above regarding the required belief in a Supreme Being is what caused me the most anxiety and self-doubt over whether I could honestly and sincerely become a Mason. I have a background in Philosophy, and that background, in the way I had internalized it, led me to question all dogma, demand good reasons for any philosophy or significant belief system (rejecting faith as a legitimate basis), and ultimately reject the theological, metaphysical, and mystical elements of organized religion in their most literal connotations. Without elaborating on the details, I consider myself a moderate skeptic, an agnostic (when pushed against the wall), but most often an atheist for all practical purposes, relative to any flavor of Judeo-Christian religion or any religion that posits the existence of a “personal” or sentient deity. As we shall see, one man’s theism can be another man’s atheism, and visa versa. It is all flushed out in semantics, metaphor, and deeper symbolism.

How could I honestly reject the belief in a Supreme Being as a distinct and personal being who created and maintains the universe (which is what I suspect many Freemasons believe to suit the requirement), yet still say I satisfied the requirement to become a Freemason? After all, the Masonic literature states clearly that no atheist can become a Mason. It even goes as far to say:

“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...”

The answer to this question was hidden in the second point above, namely that Freemasons do not require a potential candidate to explain what they mean by “Supreme Being”. This meant to me, not merely the surface level implication of an open invitation to members of monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc) or those who hold one particular god higher than others (e.g., Hinduism), but a foothold or leverage point for a much more personal and metaphorical conception of “Supreme Being.”

In summary, what I have described thus far compelled and obligated me to get very clear and precise on what I meant by the terms “God” or a “Supreme Being,” because the last thing I wanted to do was to tell my Masonic Brothers that I believed in a such a being, but in my heart be completely insincere. I would have never felt good about retaining this secret as a Freemason, and it would have either haunted me through my duration as a Mason or forced me to leave the Fraternity. Yet, I knew that Freemasonry was fundamentally an open-minded and freethinking fraternity (or at least it was at one time),

an advocate for free thought and the quest for truth, and that in principle Freemasonry could not be a “Christian fraternity” (though certainly this may be the case from the standpoint of member demographics). It was this basis and personal belief that let me to write this essay which is primarily my own personal understanding and philosophy of this Grand Architect of the Universe (I will use this phrase in place of “God” and “Supreme Being” from now on).

The reader should also note that this essay is not intended to be a complete and thorough argument for my position. It is neither a research paper nor a philosophical tract, but rather, as the title suggests, only an introduction and brief explanation of one possible way in which a traditional atheist, agnostic, or free thinker can satisfy the Freemason requirement of belief in a Supreme Being. Obviously, due to the complexity of the ideas presented here, a complete argument and treatment of the topic would require hundreds of pages in the form of a dissertation or book. But this should not prevent me from providing a cursory perspective of the topic so that those wishing to pursue it further can fill in and expand upon the gaps according to their own personal philosophies and approaches.

Freemasonry, Truth, and Philosophy

During my journey of the first, second, and third degrees of Freemasonry, I was informed via the information packet for the Entered Apprentice Degree that *Truth* is one of many primary doctrines of the Fraternity, and that teaching the principles of Truth is part of the mission of Freemasonry. In addition, the Fellowcraft or Second Degree of Freemasonry teaches that a brother should place special emphasis on the study of the Liberal Arts & Sciences, which include Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. I found these traits of the Fraternity very attractive and appreciated seeing Rhetoric and Logic called out, given that these are branches of Philosophy, which was the focus of my academic background.

However, I noticed that Epistemology, also a branch of Philosophy, was not called out in the list of arts and sciences that Freemasonry recommends we study. I found this interesting, but not surprising given how few people study epistemology, which is a very technical branch of philosophy not studied by many laymen. But why not include Philosophy as one of the liberal arts? For on the one hand Freemasonry underscores Truth as one of its primary doctrines, yet on the other hand does not include the discipline whose main purpose is the quest for Truth via reason and rigorous argumentation. One might argue that this is the function of Logic, but traditional logic is mainly the study of deductive truths, which are in the same category at mathematical truths – not truths about the world around us, the nature of life, morality, metaphysics, etc. If you want to become enlightened in the study of plants, you seek out a botanist. If you want to become enlightened in the study of mathematics or geometry, you seek out a mathematician. Likewise, if you want to become enlightened in the study of how we define the criteria for knowledge and the acquisition of truth, you seek out a Philosopher. But no such recommendation appears in the Masonic list of liberal arts and sciences. That of course, is not a show-stopper.

Although Philosophy is considered the *mother of all sciences*, I do not know why the making of Freemasonry did not include it as one of the liberal arts and sciences for recommended study. Logic provides the framework for constructing valid arguments, and Rhetoric provides the skills necessary to engage in persuasive reasoning, but neither provides the skills and background to seek or discover or understand the nature of truth.

However, what I did take away from the omission of Philosophy as a recommended subject of study is that I should draw upon my own background in Philosophy to enhance my Masonic search for the so called Truth. And this is exactly what I have done.

The above being said, I then set it about myself to draw upon my background to understand the meaning of truth in the context of Freemasonry, and more importantly regarding my understanding of the Grand Architect of the Universe. I could not help but turn to Rene Descartes and the process of methodological doubt that he employed in his “The Meditations.” I reflected on this process, not because I agreed with all the conclusions that Descartes attempted to derive from it, but because I believed this method of seeking basic truths is very efficient, simple, and elegant.

Laying the Foundations for Truth with Descartes

In his First Meditation, Descartes states:

“... from my earliest years, I have accepted many false opinions as being true, and that what I had since based on such insecure principles could only be most doubtful and uncertain; so that I had to undertake seriously once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted up to then, and to begin afresh from the foundations...”

What Descartes is saying is that throughout his entire life, he had collected many opinions about the world – opinions from his senses and perception, childhood, upbringing, reading, education, other people, indoctrination, etc – but he discovered that he could not trust all of these opinions as absolutely certain because of their unreliable sources. He then uses the analogy of the foundation of an edifice (e.g. building) to illustrate the gist of this method, which he argues resolves the problem of multiple uncertain opinions. Rather than examining each and every opinion in detail (bits and pieces of an old building), which would be endless, impractical, and highly inefficient, Descartes argues that it is more efficient to just reject the foundations of all the opinions, analogically allowing the building to collapse and starting from scratch or ground zero. It is a brilliant and elegant approach: Tear down your building of beliefs and opinions. Start anew with what you can assuredly say is a firm and trustworthy foundation. It is a daunting and frightening task, which probably can't be carried out completely, but as a governing principle of seeking the truth, I could not envision a more reliable method. I could not possibly base my most significant and personal beliefs on long past of haphazard and unreliable sources. It was time to get out the working tools of Philosophy and build a new and sturdy structure of beliefs.

The fact is that years ago I had already metaphorically tore down the building of my options and beliefs. It was not a perfect demolition (a few walls and windows remained intact), but it at least devastated the more controversial and clearly frail and termite-ridden opinions that seem to cause the most confusion, namely those concerned with God, religion, metaphysics, purpose of life, ethics, the nature of knowledge, etc. But I never finished the new building, which Freemasonry now demanded me to complete. What now?

The driving force behind Descartes method of rebuilding the building of beliefs and truths, is doubt. And this does not suggest that one become a “Doubting Thomas” or radical skeptic, but rather that we evaluate potential beliefs first on the possibility of their antitheses, and then on their probability being greater than their antitheses. Hence, beginning from ground zero, we are not going to start at the outset by creating a belief in the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent god who created the universe and human beings; it simply isn’t justifiable or comprehensible at this point in the truth building process. It would be analogous to starting to build the foundation of a building, but then jumping directly to the building of a complex and ornate archway on the 5th floor, before the floor is even built.

Hence, the initial building materials of our new building are going to be fundamental and basic building blocks of knowledge, not abstract and complex ideas that require a series or matrix of these building blocks to make beliefs out of them, let alone introduce them. In summary, doubt is the acid test of what gets built upon the new foundation, which will become a new building of truth and beliefs. You begin with no beliefs or opinions and then ask yourself what beliefs you can add that are indubitable. And by indubitable, I mean that you cannot in any way conceive the possibility that they are false. If they don’t pass this test, then they aren’t used for building materials. As you can imagine, not a lot of beliefs are going to pass this sort of test. That is fine, for it will make out building a much leaner and solid structure. This is the gist of Descartes’ First Meditation.

Continuing with his Second Meditation, Descartes places that first brick upon his new foundation, which is his own self knowledge. By “self” he did not mean a body with physical characteristics, for belief in physical bodies or things outside of our own perceptions have not been introduced yet in the building of this new structure; rather, he was referring to that which many have referred to as the “psyche”, “soul”, “mind”, and so on. And this does not include any metaphysical, spiritual, or religious presupposed baggage that normally accompanies these terms, but simply the raw, essential “self” as a pure and simple *thinking substance*. It is that thing of which you are directly aware when you introspect, and the only thing that you could possibly call your self or “you” after you strip away all else that is not an essential attribute of yourself. At this point, our sum total of truths and beliefs consists of only one, the truth that “I exist” (or that you exist), and a natural implication of Descartes “Cogito ergo sum”. The universe is nothing more than you, a thinking thing or substance. I call this the first step toward building *Tier 1* of this new system of knowledge and belief. What next?

Descartes continues to build a rationalistic argument for the existence of other bodies and their essences (to establish a foundation of the modern sciences, which require the belief that physical bodies exist independent of the mind, etc), and also goes on to construct an argument for the existence of God. However, it is with this latter argument that I believe he veered from his method of erecting only beliefs that were indubitable. But that is a different topic and debate all together!

I take Descartes' first indubitable proposition, the *Cogito ergo sum*, or existence of the self as a thinking substance, and continue to use his method of doubt to complete a Tier 2 and Tier 3. In addition to knowledge of self in Tier 1, I also include the necessary truths of mathematics (e.g, $7+5=12$) and logic (p or not- p), as well as self evident truths, such as statements that depict the pure and neutral contents of my awareness. These are all the basic building blocks of building, or rather those axioms that we use to infer other beliefs.

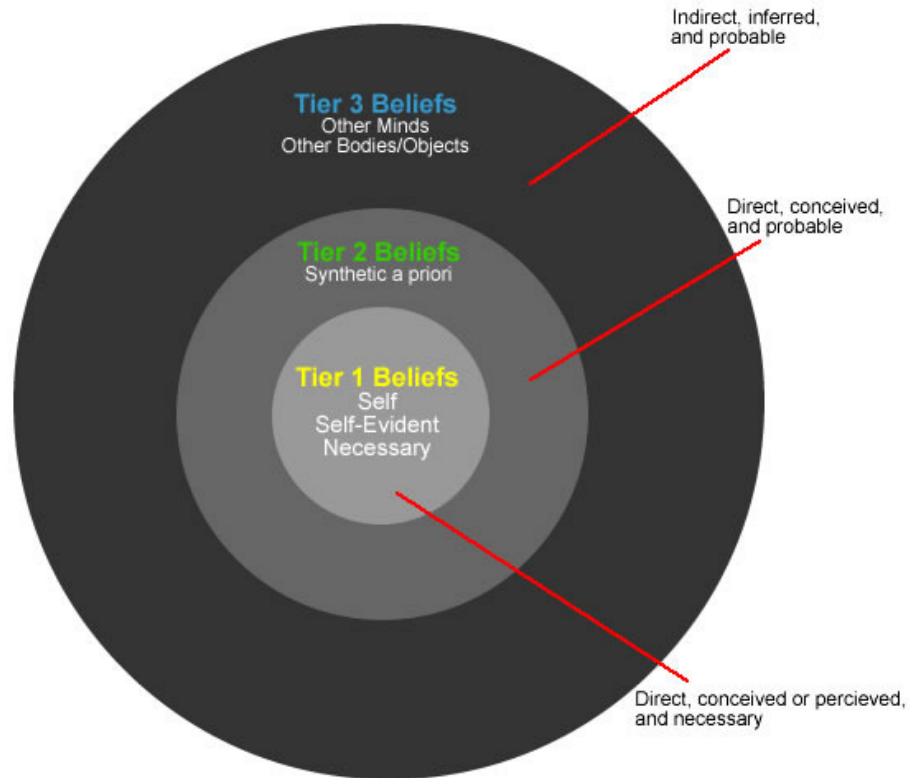
In Tier 2, I place those few beliefs that would fall into Kant's category of synthetic *a priori* statements, that is, those statements that are necessarily true but are not tautologies; these statements say something about the world about us, not just the relationship of concepts. An example of this type of statement would be "Every event has a cause". I will not go any further to elaborate on Tier 2, as the principle of causation is all I need to support my thesis in this essay. However, I do recommend reading Kant's explanation of the synthetic *a priori*, as well as the difference between analytic/synthetic, and *a priori/a posteriori* statements. It is a very interesting and useful way of categorizing statements and beliefs.

Finally, in Tier 3, I place belief in other bodies, using much of the same reasoning that Descartes used in his Second Meditation, but also including existence of other minds. The existence of other minds is something that requires more elaboration.

The *Problem of Other Minds* is a very complex and challenging problem in Philosophy. Technically, a completely sound solution to the problem may never exist, which can prove without a doubt and as a necessarily true that other minds exist. But this does not mean that there are not good reasons for believing in other minds other than my own, or that the proposition that other minds exist is not of a very high probability. As I stated above, Tier 1 knowledge includes only knowledge of the self, necessary and self-evident truths, and Tier 2 includes synthetic *a priori* statements or beliefs. I would only call Tier 1 beliefs truths in the strict sense of the world, but I would argue that statements which fall within Tier 2 and 3 are not truths, because then we move into degrees of probability and inferences rather than absolute certainty. The larger impact of this is that virtually all of our beliefs that we would like to call truths, are not truths at all, but only statements with varying degrees of probability, which is very much in line with the theory of knowledge behind the empirical sciences. It is thus a much less dogmatic way of approaching our beliefs.

Hence, to illustrate my perspective on the Problem of Other Minds, I move from the Tier 1 belief that I am aware of events (sensory data associated with verbal and written language, the behavior of bodies, etc), and then use the Tier 2 belief that every event has

a cause to posit the existence of other minds other than my own. It is merely a combination argument of analogy and causation: I talk and behave in such a way, which I am aware is caused by my mind, and I observe other collections of sensory data that talk and behave in much the same way; hence, I infer or posit that there is a high probability that these sensory data are caused by other minds, because I conceive that the alternative scenario, that they are randomly generated, is possible, yet highly unlikely. What I end up with is not a truth, but a highly probable belief in other minds, which I regard as acceptable. This is by no means a unique argument, as it has been used and discussed many times by philosophers. But I am not seeking a creative solution at this point, but only one that is functional and will contribute toward my eventual translation of G.A.O.T.U. within the context of Freemasonry. To sum up then, the following diagram illustrates the three tiers of beliefs that I have just described:



The “Extreme Makeover” of G.A.O.T.U.

G.A.O.T.U has three key terms we must define to give it unique meaning in any context: “G” or “Grand”, “A” or “Architect”, and “U” or “Universe”. For the typical monotheist, “Grand” will have a special meaning that may or may not include such concepts such as fatherhood, eternity, omniscience, grace, omnipotence, omnibeneficence, perfection, and so on. But the term need not be defined as such, and there is no rule or line of reasoning that suggests we must define it according to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this reconstruction of G.A.O.T.U., “G” simply means “sum total”, or the set of things that cannot be any larger by adding more instantiations of whatever those things may be.

Most monotheists will define “Architect”, in the context of the phrase G.A.O.T.U., as the “creator” of the universe. For fundamentalist Christians, this suggests the creation of the universe, including human beings, ex nihilo (out of nothing) by God approximately 6000 years ago. Non-fundamentalists Christians may suggest that God creates the building blocks of the universe, and then lets physics and evolution take over. Whatever the interpretation, the meaning of “Architect” is somewhat intuitive, suggesting a being that creates, designs, or builds the universe, in much the way that an operative mason builds a temple. In my reconstruction of the term, “Architect” only the sum total of Self plus all Other Minds. It is the super or “Grand” set of all minds or individual selves, or in short the collective consciousness’ of Humanity.



At this point, you may now ask yourself, how does this reconstructed “Grand Architect” *create* the Universe, thus completing the reconstruction of G.A.O.T.U.? The answer to this question is contained within the definition of the “U” or “Universe”.

Obviously, if I define “universe” as what we normally think of as the universe -- the physical world around us, the earth, planets, suns, solar systems, galaxies, etc -- then suggesting that the sum total of Self plus Other Minds creates the universe would be absurd. That would imply that a mind can create the physical universe. The reconstructed concept of the Universe is implied by the three tier belief system above. By means of Descartes method of methodological doubt, we cannot say that what we are directly aware of is the universe; rather, we can only infer with a degree of probability that a subset of our perceptions are *caused* by this physical universe, and this is still yet only an inference or posit that we cannot say is certain. What we naively view or think we observe as the objective, physical universe is thus only our own perceptions of the universe; and not just our perceptions, but our own *re-constructions* of the universe. This is very consistent with the notion of schemata in the cogitative psychological theory “Constructivism,” which suggests that we actively *architect* the schemata or constructs of our understanding of the world. We architect these constructs, vs. passively receiving them from an external source. Hence, we each have our own constructs that are denoted

by our usage of the term “universe,” and we each actively *create* or *architect* these constructs out of our raw perceptions. So, for instance, I have probably thousands of stored memories of sensory impressions (images of prior perceptions, models, observations, text, discussions, sound, etc) from my past that constitute my own construct of the universe. This is not just my understanding of the universe, but for all practical purposes it *is* the universe. I create it, and so do other Minds that I interact with, who feed me more information that is integrated into my overall construct, etc.

In summary, in this essay I have attempted to reconstruct the phrase “Grand Architect of the Universe” to mean the sum total of Self plus Other Minds who create our own cognitive constructs of the universe. It is a simple yet probably counter-intuitive and uninspiring conclusion for most people who believe in God or a Supreme Being. However, for agnostics, atheists, and free thinkers, this reconstruction is far removed from the supernatural definition that most theists assign to their understanding of God. This new construct of G.A.O.T.U. is a “human-centric” concept. For someone who doesn’t believe in a supernatural god, what more awe inspiring a idea can we find than that of the sum total of all human minds? It is humanity. It is a powerful concept, placing humanity in the spotlight of praise and worship. Humanity is not an omniscient being, but the combined knowledge of humanity is an abyss of untapped potential. Humanity may not be omnipotent, but the power of humanity is awesome and can be a source of many great things in our future. Humanity may not be omnipresent, but no matter where you go, you will always have the influence of Other Minds etched in your memories and personal identities. Humanity may not be omnibeneficent, but we have the ability to share and spread unconditional kindness, good will, and respect for each other; and because of this, humanity has the only practical key to world peace. Finally, we may not be infinitely perfect, but perfection is a relative term and we have, as a species, an unstoppable drive to improve ourselves. Collectively, we strive for an organic form of perfection that, in my humble opinion, surpasses that of a supernatural god, because it is earned, evolved, and refined over time by a miraculous engagement and cooperation of minds.

NOTES

¹ Not all Freemasons have this requirement. For instance, Continental or “red lodge” Masons, who have been in existence as long as Anglo Masons, do not require belief in a Supreme Being, nor do they forbid discussion of religion and politics in their lodges. More info at <http://www.gomasons.org/> (GOUSA) and http://www.godf.org/foreign/uk/index_uk.html (GODF)