First off, before we discuss certain philosophers germane to the development of western civilization and specifically to Freemasonry, let’s refresh on what it means to BE a philosopher. Etymologically speaking, a philosopher is a lover [philos] of wisdom [sophos]. You will be cheered to realize that everybody in the Café de Paris tonight is a philosopher. Those of us who have selected an esoteric branch of masonry did so because our outfits are the thinking man’s or woman’s masonry, unabashedly esoteric outfits that keep themselves, via ritual work and study, close to the early content of the Craft. We have so far bucked a frightening but widespread trend: the evisceration of the “stuff” of masonry and its replacement by rote memorization, charity work, and haggling over bills. In my rite, the Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis–Misraïm—or M&M for short—it is the specific requirement that new members apply themselves to intellectual endeavors related to mastery of the Craft that sets us and the other Continental obediences apart from the much more numerous mainstream lodges practicing the Craft passively.

But what sort of philosophers are we, here in the Café? Certainly the armchair sort. We have not reformed our military, social, and economic systems like Lycurgus; steered our ship of state away from too-harsh laws like Solon; taught people how to think, laugh, and die like Socrates; advanced human understanding of mathematics and music like Pythagoras; or distributed worldwide the great lesson of religion, the lesson of love represented by the initials I.N.R.I.

On the good-news front, we armchair philosophers seldom make the big mistake of academic philosophers—the ones who, like the Sophists of ancient Greece, get paid to philosophize. We do not take ourselves too seriously. In my Web searches for material on which to base this paper, I found a wonderful site (www.geocities.com/Athens/5127/phihumr5.html) that perfectly captures, in a squib called “The Philosopher’s Job,” how I see the academics:

The principal occupation of the academic community is to invent dialects sufficiently hermetic so as to prevent knowledge from passing between territories. By maintaining a constant flow of written material among the specialists of each group, academics are able to assert the acceptable technique of communication intended to prevent communications. This, in turn, establishes a standard that allows them to dismiss those who seek to communicate through generally accessible language as dilettantes, deformer, or popularizers.

But the philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome were birds of a different feather. They tried to get at the truth by taking an assertion and asking questions about it until the insanity of it is revealed, discarding that assertion, and moving on to a new one, and so forth until they were left with a small body of truths to live by, truths that are really true with a capital T.

I am always intrigued when someone worth studying turns out to be a person about whom almost nothing verifiable is known, including whether or not he existed at all. Lycurgus is such a person, and searching out the facts about his life and career brought me smack up against
what philosophy is really about: what do we KNOW and how do we know it?

In September 1964, I arrived in a Philosophy 101 class, called “Epistemology and Metaphysics,” and taught by Professor Bernard Baumrin, then of Washington U. in St. Louis but since about 1970 of Columbia, and certainly no older at the time than 30. He stood up in front of a lecture hall of about 200 hormone-driven life forms, held out his right arm in front of himself with his palm turned up and open toward his face. He looked at his hand. He looked at us.

He asked us, “How do I know this is my hand?”

The silence was deafening.

The most honest answer for a freshman to have given—though none of us was brave enough to give it—would have been something like, “Because Mommy taught me that ‘hand’ is the word for that fingery, palmy, sweaty thing hanging off my arm.” Nobody, of course, offered any answer, and neither did he, not right away. We spent the rest of the semester contemplating the writings of Aristotle, Plato, Berkeley, Descartes, and Hume and specifically their proofs for the existence of God. It may be a mercy that I remember almost no specifics from that course.

But I do remember being shaken to the core by the hand question, and by my discovery during that term that there is a whole subset of humanity spending its entire working life on problems like the meaning of “know,” the meaning of “this,” the meaning of “is” (i.e., being), and the handiness of “hands” (i.e., Plato’s theory of forms, which is about the thinginess of things).

When we look into the subject of the earliest of the ancient philosophers mentioned in the M&M second degree, Lycurgus and Solon, we are struck first by how practical their concerns were. Lycurgus and Solon did not spend their days contemplating their collective navel and fussing about Truth. They devoted their whole careers to making daily life better for their people. And second, we are struck by the fact that much of what subsequent scholars think about them is based on no or virtually no writings by their own hands. What we know about Lycurgus, for instance, virtually all comes from a famous early biographical book called Lives of the Great Greeks and Romans, by the Roman historian Plutarch. Where Plutarch got his information on Lycurgus is, to put things plainly, anybody’s guess. But since we have no primary sources on Lycurgus, we must put our faith in what we do have: books written about Lycurgus rather than books written by him.

You see how quickly we have bumped up against the issue of “What do we know and how do we know it?”

Lycurgus was an eleventh-generation descendant of Hercules. Before he reincarnated as the delicious Kevin Sorbo, Hercules was a demiurge, half man/half god. Already we’re on the border of LaLa Land, aren’t we?

Lycurgus was a Spartan and of the royal family somewhere in the period between 800 B.C. and the 660's B.C. Many sociopolitical aspects of life that we characterize as “Spartan” were already in place by 800 B.C., and Sparta was the major military power on the Greek peninsula. But it was in trouble on several fronts—military, economic, and social.

The death of Lycurgus’s father and older brother in the Spartan civil wars put him in line to be the next king, and he did take power for a short while. But at the time of his brother’s death, his sister-in-law was pregnant, and subsequently delivered a son. Lycurgus decided to give up the throne in favor of the boy, whose claim to the kingship Lycurgus believed was superior to his own. His enemies accused him of trying to have the baby killed, which was emphatically not true: he had tricked the boy’s mother into not aborting him for money. The whole situation was so distasteful that Lycurgus withdrew into voluntary exile for about 20 years (while the child grew to manhood) and traveled the known world. In Crete, a Doric colony to the west, he met up with Thales and studied his poetry and learned how the sober Cretan people governed themselves. He journeyed east to Ionia to study what that pleasure-loving hellenic
society stood for, and there he discovered the immortal works of Homer. Lycurgus assembled the fragments of the homeric epics and publicized the serious lessons of statecraft and morality in Homer to a wider audience while internalizing them within himself for future reference. The Egyptians of the period claim Lycurgus visited them, too, where he was exposed to the concept of separating the military from the menial workers.

Meanwhile, back home, the situation had been going from bad to worse. The leaders of Spartan society begged Lycurgus to come back and straighten things out; the nephew wasn’t getting the job done. There was great unrest between the helots, serflike farmers who were a conquered people, and the landowners in Sparta, and the leading families believed Lycurgus had both the nature of a born ruler and the ability to protect them from the revolt-oriented underclass. Lycurgus agreed to come home, and what he found was a country in chaos. Usury was rampant. The army, formerly pretty much invincible, had just lost a disastrous war against Argos. The Spartan way of life was coming apart at the seams. So Lycurgus gathered some important men around himself and inserted himself into the kingship as co-ruler with his nephew. That actually worked out fine, probably because Lycurgus so clearly cared nothing for the trappings and perks of royalty. And because he immediately instituted a system of laws that reformed the economy, the education system, and the structure of the government.

Lycurgus claimed that he got this package from the oracle at Delphi, in other words, that his reforms were divinely inspired. The oracle told Lycurgus that the state which observed the laws of Lycurgus would become the most famous in the world. There weren’t any “laws of Lycurgus” at that moment, but he had plenty of ideas about good governance from concepts he observed in practice during his days as a traveling man.

Lycurgus’s political reforms were embodied in a document called the Great Rhetra, which acknowledges the validity of the Spartan kings but also provides for a 28-man council with power equal to that of the two royal houses, as well as a popular assembly—clearly the model for our own bicameral legislature and the House of Lords/House of Commons paradigm in Britain. The citizenry voted on important issues, but it was the 28-man senate that decided when a vote was to be taken. Plato said of the Spartan senate that it “allays and qualifies the fiery genius of the royal office” and gives stability and safety to the commonwealth. Before the senate existed, Sparta swung back and forth between the extreme of democracy (anarchy) and the extreme of tyranny (dictatorship). With the senate in place and exerting its influence to resist those extremes, the government became stable and the people and the ruling class respected each other.

Lycurgus set up a rigorous education program for boys that involved separating them from their families, emphasizing phys ed, and teaching them to steal food as preparation for having to forage during military maneuvers. This educational system was called *agoge*, the root from which we get the word “pedagogy.”

He saw that the inequalities of land distribution in Sparta left a few families rich and the majority of the citizenry poor and unhappy. He divided the land equally so that money was no longer the measure of an individual’s worth. In theory at least, everybody had enough land that the helots could grow food on, so nobody suffered the privation of poverty. Lycurgus wanted to remove inequalities in ownership of personal property as well as real estate but knew a direct money-grab and redistribution program would be political suicide. So he took the indirect approach of banning the ownership of any gold or silver and allowed only money made of iron. The iron coins of Sparta were dipped in vinegar to make them brittle and worthless. Merchants laughed at this money because it had no intrinsic value, so imports of luxury items from richer places abroad, like Athens, stopped. And so did robbery, bribery, and litigation.

To further undercut the love of money, Lycurgus passed a law commanding that the Spartan men eat in communal mess halls. Thus nobody could spend their loose change on dainty
foods for private consumption. Once everybody began eating the same food and doing so in public buildings rather than at home, there was no way for the rich to show off their fancy things. They could no longer stay at their villas, lying on couches and stuffing themselves with delicacies, getting fat and self-indulgent and unfit for fighting.

Furthermore, the communal dining arrangements, with tables seating 15 men, offered a chance for the Spartans to discuss state business. Boys were sent to watch the men eat and pick up valuable hints about how to talk politely and come straight to the point (i.e., to “talk like men”). Especially important was the idea that a man should learn how to tell a joke well and take it when the joke was on him. To promote candor, the oldest man said to each of the diners as they came in, “Through this,” pointing at the door opening, “no words go out.”

Whenever a new man asked to be admitted to one of these eating societies, the members took a vote on him by secret ballot. Each member tossed a ball of dough into a bowl and signified disapproval by squashing the doughball flat. If any balls in the bowl had been smashed, the candidate was not admitted.

Sound familiar?

One of the rhetra (the divine utterances of the oracle) stipulated that laws should never be put into writing. If they could not be written down, obviously Spartan laws would have to be educated into the minds of the citizenry. And if that education were good enough, then law would become superfluous. Wise judges would keep the spirit of the law fresh and alive, but nobody would get bogged down with the rhetoric of the rules.

When Lycurgus saw that his ideas had taken root in the Spartan consciousness, and the chaos that greeted his return to his homeland had been replaced by discipline in public and private life, he fastened on a wonderful and witty way to ensure that the Spartans did not slide back into anarchy after his death. He told the people that everything was going well to date, but that one more thing of the greatest import remained to be done. He said he couldn’t tell them what it was before consulting the oracle at Delphi one more time. Before he left for Delphi, he made the kings, the senate, and the people of Sparta swear to obey his laws and not to change anything until he returned.

He left town all right, but he never came back, thus ensuring that the Spartans remained forever bound by their oath to keep things as he had left them. It is believed that he stopped eating and just disappeared. And his laws remained in force for five centuries.

What was going on next door, in Athens, while the Spartans were becoming, er, more Spartan? A nobleman named Solon was operating much like Lycurgus: he put up his periscope and checked out the local economic, social, and governmental scene and found it severely wanting. The steps that Solon took made democracy workable.

By about 700 B.C., Athenian Greece had evolved from a monarchy to an aristocratic republic. The ruling body of the Athenian state was tripartite: a king or archon, who handled priestly functions; a polemarch, who directed the armed forces; and a civil head of state sort of like a prime minister in today’s terms. As in Sparta, there was no written law in Athens at this time. Law was “customary” and people were governed by custom.

In 621 B.C., Draco instituted the first Code of Laws in Greece. He substituted public trial and punishment for the previously customary forms of justice: family vendetta and private vengeance. That sounds like a step forward, but under Draconian rule, debtors could be seized and sold as slaves at a landowner’s whim. And debt was rampant: everybody and everything was mortgaged to the hilt. Many small farmers lost their land when they couldn’t keep up their interest payments.

Draco’s codes made punishments very severe, hence our current usage of the term “draconian.” However, during this period, the use of legal reasoning replaced the Rambo mentality of the vendetta system. This period represents the switch from justice through
violence to justice through reasoning, logos, and rhetoric.

Solon was born, the son of a noble family, somewhere in the 630's B.C., about 15 years before Draco’s code became the law of the land. Solon’s father came from an ancient line but gave away most of his money in acts of philanthropy, leaving the family strapped for cash. When the poverty line approached, young Solon gave up writing amatory poetry (some of which survives) and became a trader. This was a relatively new occupation in Athens, and Solon traveled extensively abroad, like Lycurgus, to hone his skills. He cultivated a lifelong love of learning as a result of his studies and travels and, after scoring a military victory of his own, he returned to Athens with the status of leader and statesman. The people of Athens had just about reached the point of revolution against the harshness of their life and the rules governing it when Solon was elected, in 594 B.C., to be the archon. The people were so happy about this development that they endowed his office with broad judicial and legislative powers, just for his term.

Under the new regime, being the archon allowed Solon to change the local laws to avert civil strife, and he set to work immediately on that job. Rather than starting from ground zero, Solon decided to build on Draconian legal precedent and refresh it with his more sophisticated, less harsh worldview. He reinforced the idea of appeal to written law—the concept of constitutionalism—by having all his legislation inscribed on rotating wooden cylinders, called axones, and had these deposited in the agora, or marketplace, where the laws could be consulted by any person.

In sweeping monetary reforms, Solon canceled most mortgages on property and all personal notes. Farms formerly abandoned due to bankruptcy were repopulated, and agriculture flourished. New financial laws established protection from foreclosure and set ceilings on interest rates. Changes in inheritance laws stopped the fragmentation of family farms into ever-smaller parcels by stipulating the establishment of wills in favor of one son. Since only one son in a family could inherit a family farm, Solon required fathers to teach their sons a trade. Widows and certain other women enjoyed some degree of financial independence as they were permitted to inherit money and manage their own affairs. All these changes restricted arbitrariness in the affairs of families and clans and thus promoted civic harmony.

To rebalance the civic coffers and put his state back on sound financial footing, Solon realized—exactly like today’s politicians—that improving the balance of trade was the answer. He devalued the currency by 27 percent and banned the export of everything except for olives and olive oil and handicrafts. This action called a halt to the exportation of needed foodstuffs, guided Athenian agriculture into a single extremely profitable direction (olive cultivation), and encouraged the arts and crafts.

In the governmental arena, Solon reassured the ancient aristocratic clans but extended the franchise in three new directions. He beefed up the ecclesia, the popular assembly that approved the annual selection of the archons, and admitted the lowest class of citizens to it for the first time, thus extending governmental representation to people from all social levels. He established the Council of Four Hundred, which set the business to be handled by the ecclesia and passed laws. Having those laws on display in the agora effectively curbed powerful individuals and families and forced them to conduct themselves responsibly.

And finally, Solon established a court system where juries would be picked from every stratum of society. The decisions of the archons could be appealed to this court. And Solon passed a law that, for the first time in history, allowed any citizen to file suit on behalf of himself or any other citizen to right a wrong.

Like George Washington 24 centuries later, Solon was so popular in office that he was encouraged to stick around as archon for life. But he declined and concluded that it would be best to get away from town for a while and avoid the whole cult of personality trip. So he went
abroad for 10 years. First he visited Egypt, where he learned from the chief priest of Isis about the detailed 9,000-year history of Greece and the story of the battle between the people of Atlantis and the ancestors of Athens.

In Lydia, he met up with Croesus, a ruler of incalculable wealth, who had introduced gold coinage to the Aegean. Evidently Croesus was pretty sold on himself; he invited Solon to say so if Solon had ever seen a happier man than Croesus was, with all his loot. Solon tartly replied, “Mark this: until he is dead, keep the word happy in reserve. ’Til then, a man is not happy, only lucky.” Within a few years, Croesus lost his throne and his wealth to Cyrus the Persian....

When he came back to Athens, Solon found that his successor had kept most of the laws intact, surely the ultimate endorsement of their validity.

Like Lycurgus, Solon grasped that money lay at the root of the state’s problems. However, unlike Sparta, Athens was a thriving commercial center with its own navy, a huge foreign trade presence, and lots of wealth and luxury. Banning money and redistributing the land base in equal shares were not ideas that would fly in Athens.

Nevertheless, using his Archon’s powers, Solon took decisive action right away. He freed the people who had been enslaved because of their debts and did away with the concept of mortgages altogether. He slashed personal debt in half by fiat and restored land to the ex-debtor class.

Born an aristocrat, Solon did not believe that the common people should rule but that they should be consulted by the ruling class in a popular assembly. His reforms were all designed to foster the restoration of the bond between the ruled and the rulers—a relationship severely frayed by Draco’s hard-hearted legal system.

Collectively, Solon’s reforms freed up the political, social, and commercial energies of Athens. The state thrived under the leadership of a man who wanted his people to be a community of free men who sought justice together rather than receiving it as an imposition on them from a class of nobles.

In *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius summarizes Solon’s 10 basic tenets as these:

1. Trust good character more than promises.
2. Do not speak falsely.
3. Do good things.
4. Do not be hasty in making friends, but do not abandon them once made.
5. Learn to obey before you command.
6. When giving advice, do not recommend what is most pleasing but what is most useful.
7. Make reason your Supreme Commander.
8. Do not associate with people who do bad things.
9. Honor the gods.
10. Have regard for your parents.

I’m sure you find this list surprisingly familiar, both as a Freemason and as a person reared in the Judaeo–Christian tradition. There are significant reverberations between Solon’s tenets and the core values of the Craft and the Ten Commandments.

Solon died in about 560 B.C., and there followed about a century of separate growth for Sparta and Athens punctuated by battles here and there. The Spartans continued down Lycurgus’ s path of disdaining money and viewing the citizen-soldier as the highest life form. The Athenians developed an affluent, complex society in which book learning, poetry-writing, and yes, philosophizing, became the cardinal virtues. Human nature being what it is, the Greek peninsula proved too small to house two great powers like these, and the Peloponnesian War broke out in 431 to settle the matter once and for all. This war dragged on for decades. Pericles rose to be the toast of Athens and its ruler, but he died in the plague of Athens in 429. An
unstable truce was declared between the warring city-states in 421, but it did not hold. In 411, an oligarchy (“rule by a few”) was instituted in Athens, but democracy was restored shortly afterwards. In 405 a Spartan commander destroyed the last of the Athenian fleet, and in 404 Sparta, now firmly in control of the peninsula, set up an oligarchy of Athenian nobles to rule Athens. Unfortunately, the brutality of that gang earned them the name of the Thirty Tyrants.

Who was driving the intellectual life of Athens during this period? A short, plump, pug-nosed ex-soldier named Socrates, that’s who. And get this: Socrates wrote nothing. All we know about him we learn from the writings of others, and chief among them is his most famous pupil, Plato.

Socrates wrote nothing because he felt that knowledge was a living, interactive thing. He invented what we now call the “Socratic Method,” which consists of asking people questions about their positions on a given topic and using their answers to further stimulate questions and so on and so on until it becomes clear to the audience, the questioner (Socrates), and the poor slob being questioned that either he’s onto a good thing or his original idea was absurd. He himself never took a position on anything and, when pressed by the authorities in the trial that eventuated in his death by hemlock, he claimed to know nothing at all except that he knew nothing.

Socrates did not go about calling what he did the Socratic method. He, and Plato, referred to it by the Greek word *elenchus*, which is close to meaning “cross-examination.” Eventually this concept evolved into dialectic—the idea that truth needs to be pursued by modifying one’s position through questioning and conflict with opposing ideas. Truths are thus not discovered; they are sort of chased down, and the chase is never really over. This idea is akin to our concept of the successive veils of Isis, which seekers attempt to remove but which themselves only give way to more and more veils.

The one positive statement Socrates seems to have made is a definition of virtue (*arete*): “Virtue is knowledge.” If one knows the good, one will always do the good. The corollary is obvious: if one does something wrong, it’s because he did not really know what the good is.

Making sure that people knew good from not-good was very important to Socrates. It justified his tearing down their moral positions because if they have wrong ideas about virtue, morality, love, or any other ethical idea, they can’t be trusted to do the right thing.

 Needless to say, Socrates made lots of enemies by simply showing how stupid people are. He did so for what he perceived to be a good reason, but this didn’t keep them from resenting his superior brain. Plus a few of his students went down some bad roads. One became the leader of the Thirty Tyrants and killed a slew of “enemies of the state.” Another guy, with a drinking problem, lipped off in public and was accused of sacrilegious high-jinks and profanity and then, rather than returning from the war against Sparta to face the charges in court, he defected and took up as a general for Sparta and against Athens. Everybody knew Socrates had been the mentor of these men, so his own reputation took a severe hit.

The charges the state brought against Socrates were tied up with impiety and the corruption of Athenian youth. He was 70 years old at the time of his trial, in 399, and he had influenced a couple generations’ worth of the city’s best and brightest. Now during that long war with Sparta, Athenians got more and more nervous about the home front. Many came to feel that intellectuals were weakening Athenian society by undermining its traditional views and values. Well might the people in general have worried about a man with no visible means of support being allowed to wander around the city, followed by bands of adoring young men, asking them questions about, say, the justice system. And it didn’t help matters that the comic playwright Aristophanes had created a hysterical caricature of Socrates as a bumbling but subversive teacher in a play staged in Athens 24 years earlier.

Socrates was indicted for “introducing new gods” and refusing to support the established
Greek pantheon. He talked about his *daimonion*, or “guardian spirit” or personal “divine sign” all the time, which did smack of the introduction of new deities. And because the state alone had the power to determine what was a suitable object for religious veneration and relevant processes for recognizing gods, anybody who ignored those rules was effectively challenging the legitimacy of the Athenian democracy. It was on shaky grounds anyway because of coming up short in the Peloponnesian War, and this whole situation conspired to put and keep Socrates on the hot seat.

Plato attended the trial of Socrates and a few years later wrote the *Apology* (which word means “defense speech”) of Socrates, which styles itself as kind of a court transcript. Socrates’s performance in the witness box did not work out well. He made his challengers look stupid, and to the charge that he intentionally corrupted the youth of the city, he simply said that that didn’t make sense because if he harmed them, they would only harm him back and no sane person would risk that. He repeatedly told the court how little he knew about anything, and that did not impress his judges either.

After the guilty verdict, during a part of the trial in which Socrates was supposed to argue for a suitable penalty other than death, he instead cheesed off the judges even further by telling them he thought he was doing the Athenians “the greatest possible service” in showing them the error of their ways and should instead be rewarded. He told them he thought free meals for life at the state’s expense would be a reasonable boon. When the vote was taken on his punishment, more people voted for the death penalty than had voted to find him guilty in the first place.

In addition to Socrates’ promulgation of the Delphic oracle’s dictum to “Know thyself,” Freemasons need to pay particular attention to the manner of his death, which is documented in Plato’s *Phaedo*. Near the end of our second degree, the Orator says, “And, as affirmed Plato, Freemasonry has no other purpose than to teach you how to die. It teaches you first how to kill in you the ‘Old Man’: the instinctive and selfish being. It teaches you then, after this stripping down, to direct yourself into a Universe with which you are not familiar. And it will teach you, one day near, to live anew, and this time, eternally.”

You know the story of Socrates’s death scene. He withdrew to a private room, surrounded by his current students (including Plato and the real Phaedo, a photograph of whose house is on the Internet). Socrates had his wife and sons come in for a few minutes but dismissed them after only a few words were exchanged. When his students began to cry, he told them to knock it off, saying he kicked the women and kids out to avoid just that kind of carrying-on.

He joked around about not being dead yet when they asked him how he wanted to be buried. He reminded his followers that they would just be burying his body, not the “real Socrates,” and said he would be going “to the joys of the blessed.” When the jailer brought the hemlock for him to drink, at his leisure between then and nightfall, he asked his students to note how “charming” the man had been in treating him so well while in prison and now, in giving him leave to postpone his death as long as possible.

But Socrates drank the poison before the sun had left the hilltops. As if to put to rest once and for all the charge of impiety, Socrates asked if he could make a libation out of the contents of the poison cup to any god. But the jailer said simply that he never made up more of the liquid than was necessary to kill the guilty. At that, Socrates took the cup and drained it.

As he was reclining and the poison worked its way up from his feet to his heart, he remained calm and shortly before the end he uncovered his face for a moment and told his best friend, “I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?” Crito reassured him on that point and asked if there was anything else. Silence spoke for Socrates at that moment.

What do we learn as masons from this man and this death scene? That it is hard to be smart and a thankless task to help other people become smarter. That when the going gets tough,
people will try to find somebody to pin their failures and troubles on. That it is important to keep one’s eye fixed on the ultimate resting place of one’s soul and not let oneself become too wrapped up in the hurly burly of this transitory life because it’s a very brief span compared to one’s existence before taking corporeal form and one’s existence after giving that up.

Perhaps one reason Socrates faced his own demise with such equanimity is that he believed death brought an opportunity for philosophical discourse with the greatest people ever to have lived. I’m hoping for that myself.

You will be glad to learn that I have little to say about Philosopher #4, Pythagoras. That’s partly because not a great deal is known about him, but more because I just do not understand mathematics and would need enormous hand-holding to comprehend any of Pythagoras’s mathematical constructs beyond the most superficial yammerings about the square of the hypoteneuse.

Pythagoras lived about 582 B.C. to 507 [are you getting the pattern here?] but though reared in Greece, he spent almost his entire adult life abroad. Like Lycurgus and Solon, he traveled extensively as a young man, including a 22-year stint in Memphis and Thebes studying hermetic thought. It turned out that hanging around Egypt was a life-threatening gambit: when King Cambyses conquered that country, he snatched up all the sages, including Pythagoras, and sent them into captivity in Babylon. How he got out of that fix is unclear, but the Babylonian experience exposed him to the Persian and Chaldean magi, and from there he went to India to study.

Upon returning to his hometown of Samos, in Syria, he founded a school of philosophy that enjoyed brilliant success but only for a short time. Like Socrates, Pythagoras ran afoul of the powers that be and got himself kicked out of his homeland altogether. He moved then to Crotona, a Greek settlement on the southern coast of Italy, and established a big, new school of 300 followers, some of whom signed on because he had, or claimed to have, supernatural powers.

In the beginning this school was a philosophical, not mathematical, endeavor, founded on the principle of the transmigration of souls and the immortality of the soul. The group of 300 amounted to a religious cult. Eventually they annoyed Crotona’s leading citizen, and his faction torched the Pythagoreans’ meeting-hall with them in it, killing 40 scholars, and Pythagoras fled Italy for good. His ideas jumped over to mainland Greece and enjoyed some success but did not live long there, probably because Pythagoras left practically no writing of his own. Scholars have been unable to unravel his personal mathematical achievements from those of his many students in the school, partly because the whole gang was extremely secretive about what they were up to.

Subjects taught at his academy included astronomy, music, and philosophy, and he was the first teacher in the ancient world to invite women to study in his school and to consider them to be equal to men in opportunity. Both his wife and his daughter were numbered among his pupils.

Nutrition and healing were of interest to Pythagoras, and he made the consumption of meat taboo among his disciples. He believed in the harmony of body, mind, and spirit in life and in healing—an idea that sounds commonplace today but was probably revolutionary in its time.

Pythagoras was apparently the first astronomer in the hellenic tradition to support the belief that the Earth is round and that it and the stars rotate around some kind of “central fire” in the universe. Oddly enough, he did not say that the sun was that central point.

I eagerly await an explanation from more sophisticated Masonic minds as to how geometry, with which Pythagoras and Euclid were both closely associated, came to be called in the Leyland Manuscript the same thing as masonry. Coil states that “The Forty-seventh Problem [of Euclid] is a symbol appurtenant to the Master of a lodge, but there is no Pythagorean
philosophy in Craft Masonry” (page 492 of Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia).

Pythagoras noticed that vibrating strings produce harmonious tones when the ratios of the lengths of the strings are whole numbers. But modern computer-facilitated experiments with this idea, according to information I found on the Web, have not produced anything other than cacophony. The Music of the Spheres remains elusive.

According to contemporary mathematician John M. Dwyer, writing on the Web at http://es.udmercy.edu/~dwyerjm/ROMANCE.HTM, the Pythagoreans at Crotona believed that “the entirety of creation could be understood using a combination of music and mathematics (principally geometry) as their tools.” They “distinguished between mathematics which examines the nature of relationships and music which represented the particular relationships of the world around them,” according to Dwyer.

By working the numbers following their observation of the shadow of the earth on the moon during a lunar eclipse, the Pythagorans not only decided that the Earth was round but also concluded that all the other planets were round, too, and that they revolved around each other. Kepler much later fashioned his model of the solar system, which he called the “Music of the Spheres,” on Pythagorean principles. Coming at these ideas from our 21st-century mindset, it is hard to recognize their impact on the thinkers of the old world. But the idea that math and science could explain the world was revolutionary in Ancient Greece.

At last we come to I.N.R.I., which is not a philosopher but a philosophY, a coordinated package for spiritual growth, an initiatic path that embraces gnosis. In most artistic renderings of the Crucifixion, a scrap of parchment displaying I.N.R.I. is shown attached to the cross above Jesus’ head. In this context, the initials stand for Iesus Nazareus Rex Iudeorum, Latin for “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” In Christian terms, this acronym has become a kind of shorthand code standing for Jesus’ willingness to play out the part His Father created for Him, that of the dying-god who sacrifices Himself for the welfare of His people.

The alchemists use I.N.R.I. to stand for Igne Natura Renovatur Integra, or “fire is that by which Nature renews itself.” The acronym also means, according to our degree work, Intra Nobis Regnum Ieshouah, or “the kingdom of Jesus is within us.” Finding that Godspark is the gold at the end of the rainbow for every Freemason willing to work the path with seriousness of purpose.

And mighty hard work it is, too. All this looking into the blackness of darkness, to borrow a phrase from literary criticism. The facing up to the evil that lurks inside ourselves. The conscious decision to examine one’s own motives and actions in order to “die to vice,” which must perforce come before one can hope to “live for virtue.” I have the feeling that one never really gets over being a second-degree Mason. There’s no end to what we must learn in the second degree—so many breakthroughs, so little time....