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ALCOHOLISM, A.A., AND THE CHALLENGE OF AUTHENTICITY

by

PATRICIA ANN MADDEN  
B.A. University of Central Florida 1981

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Liberal Studies  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the possibilities of living an authentic life for an alcoholic, both in and out of Alcoholics Anonymous. Authenticity is explored using the existential models put forth by Jean-Paul Sartre and Soren Kierkegaard. Alcoholics Anonymous figures prominently in this analysis. It is suggested that A.A. acts inauthentically in its claims that it is not a religious organization. A.A. creates special problems for female alcoholics because of the sexist and masculinist nature of its primary literature. While A.A. claims that its message is the only way by which an alcoholic can recover, other treatment methods exist. Suggestions are made that A.A. revise its main texts, and two alternative organizations to A.A. are briefly discussed.

For Bob,  
and my Mother and Father

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First and foremost, this thesis would not have been possible without the steady and guiding influence of Dr. Donald Jones. His brilliance and adventurous intellect have been an inspiration to me. My deepest thanks go out to him.

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Finally, to those who suffer with alcoholism, struggling to find meaning and live authentically, may you never lose hope.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

If there is one obligation that human beings share, it is to accept responsibility for their own life. Regardless of family, income, position in life, or health status, it is up to the individual to make the hard choices that will determine who she is. “Existence precedes essence,” Sartre wrote (28), and with that slogan the philosopher established a mandate by which to live life existentially. Our choices essentially make us who we are and *how* we choose may or may not lead to an authentic life. If a person chooses a course of action only because society tells her to do so, the choice is inauthentic because she is not freely choosing. A choice based on deterministic thinking or believing is also inauthentic. For example, if an overweight person chooses not to diet because she’s read that most diets fail, therefore she “can’t really do anything about her weight anyway,” she is in bad faith because she has not made a choice toward freedom. For Sartre, a person is completely responsible for who she is and who she will become.

Living an existentially authentic life holds special complications for a person addicted to alcohol. This is so because alcoholism can severely limit a person’s ability to make free choices as the alcoholic finds himself compelled to drink. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV-TR* defines dependence to alcohol as follows:

- A maladaptive pattern of substance use, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by three (or more) of the following, occurring at any time in the same 12-month period:
  1. tolerance, as defined by either of the following:
    - a need for markedly increased amounts of the substance to achieve intoxication or desired effect
    - markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of substance
  2. withdrawal, as manifested by either of the following:
    - the characteristic withdrawal syndrome for the substance
    - the same (or a closely related) substance is taken to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms
  3. the substance is often taken in larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended
  4. there is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use
  5. a great deal of time is spent in activities to obtain the substance, use the substance, or recover from its effects
  6. important social, occupational or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of substance use
  7. the substance use is continued despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by the substance (e.g., continued drinking despite recognition that an ulcer was made worse by alcohol consumption) (197).

While the *DSM-IV* refers to alcoholism only as “a maladaptive pattern of substance use,” the National Council on Alcoholism takes this definition a step further, calling dependence on alcohol “a disease” (Screen 1). In 1960 Jellinek described alcoholism as a primary disease involving acquired increased tissue tolerance to alcohol; adaptive cell metabolism; withdrawal symptoms and “craving;” and loss of control (37-38).

This view of alcoholism as a disease is in keeping with Alcoholics Anonymous’s belief that alcoholism is caused by an “allergy” (Silkworth xxx). Indeed, the first notion of alcoholism as a disease came about around the time of the temperance movement and the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous. While the disease model has been widely accepted in the alcohol recovery industry, it has been refuted most notably by Fingarette



in his 1988 book, *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as a Disease*. Fingarette argued that alcoholics have the choice to drink though as “heavy drinkers,” they have made drinking the “central activity” of their lives (100). But recent scientific studies point more toward a combination of genetic and environmental factors for the causes of alcoholism, including numerous studies of twins showing that alcoholics may be genetically and environmentally predisposed to their alcoholism (I-Chao Liu, Blacker, Ronghui, Fitzmaurice, Tsuang, and Lyons 2004; Krueger, Iacono, McGue, and Patrick 2004).

Determining whether alcoholism is a disease is not the purpose of this thesis. There are times when I will address the disease notion, particularly as it relates to A.A. and authenticity. But references to the disease model will occur only in relationship to authenticity. The causes of alcoholism are for science to sort out. One fact is clear: There are nearly 18 million adult Americans who are alcoholic (NCADD 2002). The question of whether an alcoholic can lead an authentic life might seem a luxury or even trivial in the wake of the physical and psychological realities of addiction. The question is important partly due to the number of alcoholic sufferers. However, alcoholism affects not just the drinker but those with whom she comes into contact, be it family, co-worker, friend or acquaintance. As a result, large portions of society are living “under the influence,” and are making choices directly or indirectly related to the effects of alcohol. If it is true that the alcoholic is compelled to drink because she has a disease, what implications does this have for authentic choice? On the surface, if the alcoholic succumbs and drinks, it would seem that she has made a choice in bad faith since she has a disease and “can’t do anything about it.” But what about a person diagnosed with

depression? Is the clinically depressed person unable to function normally, perhaps sleeping all the time or not eating, because she is making choices in bad faith? Isn't that a return to the outdated notion that one must simply "pull yourself up by your bootstraps"? If alcoholism is a disease, then drinking would seem to be the authentic choice because the afflicted is only choosing to do what he cannot control: drink.

### **Shame on Me**

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes a man looking through a keyhole, so caught up in what he is seeing that he nearly forgets himself (347-350). When another person discovers him, the man realizes that others exist in the world and that they have the ability to regard him with judgments. In fact, the man at the keyhole recognizes that he has been eavesdropping and so, labels himself as such and feels shame. This analogy on the nature of man, the other, and shame—though Sartre undoubtedly did not intend it—is a good picture of the alcoholic coming to grips with his condition and himself. Drinking, initially, is a selfish act. When the alcoholic drinks, seeking to bring about pleasure or escape from troubles, the alcohol separates him from the rest of the world and he becomes an observer. The chemical influence of the alcohol may give him a feeling of isolation, loneliness or at least, aloneness. But soon, others get in the way of the intimacy of his experience with drink. His wife confronts him about his drinking. He crashes a car after stopping at a café for a glass or two of wine. Or perhaps he just begins to become aware that he does not drink as others do, that he "needs" a drink to get through the day. Regardless, the other has found him out. His drinking is seen as problematic and eventually, the label *alcoholic* will be used. The alcoholic then experiences shame as his

level of awareness has expanded outside of himself. He has been caught at the bar—at Sartre’s keyhole.

This is a traditional approach to alcoholism and it is largely correct in its assessment of environmental responses to the alcoholic, such as the distraught wife or smashed car. In one version of the traditional story, the alcoholic would give up drinking and join Alcoholics Anonymous. In doing this, he would acknowledge society’s opinion that habitual drinking is bad and that he should not just stop, but renounce it by joining A.A. and adopting its philosophy of abstinence and religious morality. To remain an active alcoholic because that is just the way one is, or one has a disease, would be, for Sartre, bad faith. But this is where it gets tricky: Sartre believed that denying our freedom “in order to live out roles which have been allotted us by other people” (qtd. in Warnock 115) is also living in bad faith. If the drinker assigns himself the label *alcoholic*, and stops drinking because society tells him to quit, that is not an authentic choice. But if the drinker truly believes that he is an alcoholic by way of his own insights, remaining in an alcoholic state may be bad faith. I say “may be,” because in order for the drinker to authentically stop and renounce drinking, he must see that continuing to drink enslaves him; he is not free. When the alcoholic sees that he is not free, it is at that moment he is paradoxically freed to choose his future.

But what if the practicing alcoholic does not see herself as enslaved? Others may see her as being at the mercy of alcohol but she herself does not grasp that she has lost control over the substance. This lack of insight may be intrinsically linked with the nature of alcoholism since, as Denzin points out, the disease involves intense “denial” (76).

Denzin describes several layers of denial that the alcoholic uses as a shield so that she can continue to drink (76-83): The alcoholic claims that she has power and control (self-pride) over alcohol; the alcoholic secretly drinks so that she can “pass” as a “normal;” the alcoholic does not take responsibility for her drinking, instead blaming the other who confronts her about the problem; the drinker blames alcohol for her actions while she drinks; and the drinker believes that she and her problems are unique, thus justifying her drinking. All of these components, Denzin says, lead to a web of manipulation and self-deception. The alcoholic self is “attached to the world through a circuit of drinking. He finds the core meaning of his existence in drinking and in alcohol” (82).

Yet if the alcoholic “in denial” creates this kind of system of self-deception, it implies that on some level, the alcoholic is aware that her drinking falls outside the boundaries of what is considered “normal.” Her actions could be seen as a rebellion against a society that says she should stop drinking. The drinker who goes to such lengths as those Denzin describes certainly knows that she wants to drink—she finds her “core meaning” in alcohol. The question becomes whether finding such an existential meaning in alcohol is inauthentic.

### **Authentic Living**

Just what does it mean to be authentic? Standard definitions generally agree with Heidegger and Sartre that authenticity requires accepting responsibility for one’s own life, choosing authentically without social conformity. (“Heidegger;” “Existentialism”). For Sartre, the chief obstacle to living an authentic life was “bad faith” (87). Bad faith is a consequence not just of a person lying to himself, but of *negating* himself by pretending

that he is not conscious of what in fact he is conscious. In addition, because a person can imagine not only what is but what *is not*, bad faith is an inevitable condition of life. But to live authentically, one must accept responsibility for one's freedom, and when one does this, one chooses freely. These choices determine *who* one is. As previously mentioned, "existence precedes essence."

Inauthentic living, or bad faith, is a conscious way of deceiving oneself. In the case of alcoholism, if an alcoholic knows that she is alcoholic but pretends to herself that she is not, she is not living authentically. She is living in bad faith. This asymmetry between what is and what is not creates a divided self.

The alcoholic self is divided between the sober and the drinking selves (Denzin 121). These two "selves" create conflict, resulting in negativity and self-destruction. The alcoholic's "other," (partner or spouse) is directly affected by the split selves and behavior of the alcoholic, and so, is profoundly engulfed in the drama. The relationship between the other and the alcoholic is fused with dishonesty because of the drinker's desire to keep drinking at all costs. But it is my view that while the alcoholic is acting falsely to the other about drinking, she is not necessarily acting falsely to herself because her goal *is* to drink. The relationship with herself moves toward an inauthentic state when drinking becomes the most important objective. At this point, the alcoholic finds herself divided between those she loves and her desire to drink. Sober, she may experience horror at the thought of losing her loved ones over her drinking, yet another side of her, the alcoholic side, seeks out the drink. This dilemma splits her and she experiences a "double life."

Another case of the splitting occurs when the alcoholic pretends that he is “normal” or perhaps sober around the public. He may have just had three glasses of vodka, but he attempts (and may succeed) to act as if he has not had anything to drink. Or he may have just one or two drinks at a party to conform to those who drink non-alcoholically. The others don’t know that he drinks alcoholically because he appears to be drinking just like them. Internally though, the alcoholic may know that he is not a normal drinker. His outward behavior does not match his inner knowledge or his behavior when he is alone. He becomes two people: the ordinary social drinker and the solitary alcoholic drinker. Both “selves” are defined by drinking.

Is it authentically possible to be two places simultaneously? Can one be there, and also, be *there*? Certainly one can hold two opposing viewpoints, but this is not the same as living a double-life because this requires two separate yet conflicted decisions. Holding two opposing viewpoints does not require a choice between the two. Yet in living a state of being, one chooses to live it. So in choosing to pose as a normal drinker yet to remain an active alcoholic, one is choosing two ways of being that are conflicted with one another.

The active alcoholic knows that she is separate from others. She shows that she is aware of this when she hides her drinking or pretends she is a normal drinker—she doesn’t want to be found out. Yet when she drinks, she attempts to blot out the knowledge of the existence of the other. This attempt at “forgetting” the other is inauthentic because it denies that there are others in the world.

However, the converse may be true. The alcoholic feels so alone in the world that she drinks to feel a part of things, to feel less of a separation from others. This again

would be inauthentic because it is a denial of the fact that human beings *are* separate from each other (Heidegger 30-31). Her drinking is a way to dispel the anxiety that comes from this awareness. In addition, when one becomes aware of something, one cannot become unaware. In drinking to kill this awareness, the alcoholic attempts to will her awareness into its pre, non-existent state.

In drinking, the alcoholic seeks to eliminate the feelings of withdrawal experienced while sober (Jellinek 140). In addition to the pleasure she initially felt as a beginning drinker, the alcoholic's guilt and remorse over drinking drive her to further drinking (Denzin 19). The alcoholic becomes trapped in this cycle as she finds her freedom to choose diminished by her addiction. In his work, *The Denial of Death*, Becker's discussion of Kierkegaard's philosophy of authentic man could describe the alcoholic's plight:

One chooses slavery because it is safe and meaningful; then one loses the meaning of it, but fears to move out of it. One has literally died to life but must remain physically in the world (80)

The drunk, with his numbed feelings, memory black-outs, and clouded thinking, negates his consciousness, and lives in a gray world of twilight. The possibilities for making an authentic choice are obscured, and even perversely twisted, by the effects of inebriation to alcohol including slowed reactions, body coordination, difficulty in speaking, and an increased risk of physical violence (Denzin 19). The latter may be explained by the belief that alcoholism is a disease that not only affects the body but the spirit (A.A., 2001: 18, 44).

Under the disease model, the disease-ridden alcoholic drinks to alleviate the effects of her drinking. If the alcoholic believes that she is ill, she may justify her drinking in bad faith. Kierkegaard believed that determinism is “fatalistic,” and is a condition of despair, or not becoming the self (173, 163). More importantly in terms of this thesis, the practicing alcoholic is not authentic for “in despair he has lost his self,” and furthermore, “he has lost God,” because he has negated possibility (Kierkegaard 173). By drinking, the alcoholic shuts off the possibility of making sober decisions, of staying true to his thoughts free from the spell of alcohol.

However, Kierkegaard also believed that despair, or not becoming the self is at its highest level as consciousness increases (163). The self, focused on finitude or the worldly, does not acknowledge infinitude, or godliness. Despair is negativity, but “to reach truth one must pierce through every negativity,” therefore one is closer to “salvation,” when one is conscious rather than unaware (177).

Kierkegaard stated that the “self is spirit” (146), and the less conscious she is of being in despair, the less conscious she is of being a spirit—herself. If the alcoholic has a disease of spirit, she has a disease of the self that goes beyond physicality. She possesses a self that wills not to be herself. In drinking, the alcoholic denies herself by numbing her feelings and disengaging from responsibility. In this way, the alcoholic becomes selfless. There are those, Alcoholics Anonymous among them (2001:62), who would say the alcoholic is self-centered, but in fact she is not self-centered enough. In denying herself, she chooses to live in inauthenticity.



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It is clear that the existentialist philosophers such as Sartre, Heidegger and Kierkegaard equate authenticity with freedom. I've shown how a practicing alcoholic might be choosing to live an inauthentic life by continuing to drink. But what if the alcoholic chooses not to drink? Is this even possible? Part of addiction is the compulsion to use the addictive substance, and alcoholism is a condition where it is common for "relapses" to occur (Denzin 34-36). While Fingarette has argued that it is possible to moderate one's drinking (45-46), abstinence is widely regarded as the most successful way to treat alcoholism (NCADD) (though in 1995 Sobell and Sobell noted that this is mainly true only in severe forms of alcoholism). If this is the case, continuing to drink would only reinforce the addictive state. But the Catch-22 of alcoholism remains: If the disease makes one a slave to drink, how then can one stop drinking? For two million people around the world membership in Alcoholics Anonymous has been the way to stop drinking (A.A., 2001: xxiii). I will discuss A.A. specifically in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO: AUTHENTICITY AND THE A.A. DILEMMA

Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point.  
We asked His protection and care with complete abandon.  
Alcoholics Anonymous: the “Big Book” (A.A., 2001: 59)

It is probable that at some point in the life of an active alcoholic, she will find herself dealing with Alcoholics Anonymous. This is often not her choice, but is due to the insistence of her partner or spouse, a therapist, or the court system. Thus recovery—achieving and maintaining sobriety—may be forced upon the alcoholic. However, once in the A.A. program, it is up to the alcoholic whether to accept and apply the beliefs integral to staying sober in A.A. This choice brings with it further questions and complications regarding the possibility of the alcoholic living an authentic life. In this case, is it possible for the *recovering* alcoholic in A.A. to life authentically? I will discuss this question, but first, it is important to briefly describe life in A.A.

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Alcoholics Anonymous has become ubiquitous in American culture. From its inception in 1935 when founder Bill Wilson and his wife, Lois, hosted small gatherings of alcoholics at their Brooklyn home in New York, over 100,000 A.A. groups have formed worldwide (A.A., 2001: xxiii). In addition, A.A.’s presence has grown internationally with over 700,000 members overseas (A.A., 2001: xxiii). However, the bulk of A.A.’s members reside in the United States (A.A. 2005).

Alcoholics Anonymous describes itself as a “fellowship” of recovering men and women whose “desire to stop drinking” (A.A., 2001:139) fulfills its only membership requirement. A.A.’s principal philosophy stems from the idea that only an alcoholic can

help another alcoholic to recover from his addiction. Though Dr. William Silkworth<sup>1</sup>, a co-founder of A.A., held the opinion that people who are alcoholic suffer from an “allergy” to alcohol (A.A., 2001: xxvi), Alcoholics Anonymous believes that alcoholics suffer from a “spiritual disease,” wherein they “have not only been mentally and physically ill, [they] have been spiritually sick” (A.A., 2001:64).

### **The A.A. Meeting**

The alcoholic who attends her first A.A. meeting, which is usually held in a local church, will experience a structured hour of testimony and discussion by fellow alcoholics. There are “open meetings,” that any member of the public can attend, and “closed meetings,” designed solely for alcoholics. Open and closed meetings differ little in structure. The meeting generally begins with a prepared welcoming statement by the meeting “chair,” (a member who has three or more months of sobriety) followed by the Serenity prayer:

God grant me the courage to accept the things I cannot change  
The courage to change the things I can  
And the wisdom to know the difference (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 125)

After the prayer the chair of the group will ask a member to read “How it Works,” from the group’s main text, Alcoholics Anonymous, known as the *Big Book*. The chair has usually chosen one or two short readings in the form of meditations--related to drinking and recovery--from A.A. approved literature, then group discussion gets underway as each member talks about what the reading has meant to him in terms of his

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Alcoholics Anonymous is made up of laypersons; it is not affiliated with any professional medically established organization. Further reading on A.A.’s bylaws and principles can be found in its lists of “Twelve Traditions,” and “Twelve Concepts.”

drinking, and relates testimony about his drinking. Although no member is required to share, he is expected to introduce himself before he “passes.”

The introduction of the member to the group is a crucial part of A.A. When it is her turn to speak (taking turns is usually done in the form of Round Robin), the member introduces herself with her first name followed by the admission that she is an alcoholic. For example: “Hello, I’m Jane and I’m an alcoholic.” If there is time, members are permitted to speak more than once at a meeting, but each subsequent time that Jane speaks, she must reintroduce and identify herself as an alcoholic.<sup>2</sup> After speaking, the group will thank her and move on to the next person. No interruption of a speaker or “cross-talk” is permitted. If this happens, the chair will ask that it stop. At five minutes to the hour, the chair asks if anyone has a “burning desire,”—something that a member feels an urgency to relate. If that is not the case, discussion proceeds around the room until the top of the hour when the chair asks that they close the meeting in their “usual” way. Each group has its own way of closing though it is usually done with prayer. It is not uncommon for the group to join hands and recite the Lord’s Prayer from the New Testament (often from the King James’ version of the bible). After the prayer, members continue to hold hands and recite the common A.A. expression: “Keep coming back; it works if you work it!” The meeting breaks up and members often chat and smoke. Newcomers are approached, welcomed, and are often given a “phone list,” with the names and phone numbers of group members. Though meetings are often somber, and even tragic, in subject matter, members of the group are usually friendly and there is much camaraderie.

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<sup>2</sup> While A.A. does not claim any other rule for its members than the desire to stop drinking, there is enormous group pressure to conform to the style of introduction to the rest of the group.

## The Twelve Steps

While A.A. meetings are available throughout the day in hundreds of cities, sponsorship and the Twelve Steps are the life's blood of A.A. membership. It could be said that the Twelve Steps are to A.A. what the Ten Commandments are to the Jewish and Christian religions. Though written only as "suggestions," the Twelve Steps comprise the A.A. philosophy and serve as guides to the A.A. way of life. It is important to list them here as they are key to understanding the process that a recovering alcoholic undergoes while she is in A.A. Note the number of times that God or a "higher power," is mentioned, specifically in the second, third, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eleventh steps.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs (A.A., 2001: 59-60).

In reading these "steps," it is interesting that alcohol is mentioned only once—in the first step. The A.A. program is clearly "spiritual" in nature—God will help the drinker

recover and stay abstinent from alcohol. This belief in God is absolutely vital in achieving sobriety in A.A. It is not the alcoholic who stops drinking—he has tried and failed many times—it’s God who takes away the “obsession” to drink after the alcoholic surrenders his will, believing that only God can (and will) rescue him from his plight. This belief system makes sense in terms of the disease model of drinking. If alcoholism is a disease, and the alcoholic has no choice but to drink, it follows that he alone cannot stop drinking—only God can prevent him from picking up the drink. The alcoholic then lives according to the twelve steps which firmly place God at the center of his life.

### **Sponsorship**

The A.A. member seldom proceeds through the Twelve Steps without the help of her “sponsor.” The sponsor studies and applies the steps with a sponsor of his own and has usually been sober for a longer period of time than the newcomer. The sponsor becomes the friend, confidant, and quasi-therapist to his “sponsee,” as she is called in A.A. Having a sponsor in A.A. is not just for newcomers, many A.A. members have sponsors throughout their membership. It is not uncommon for an A.A. member to “work the steps” with a sponsor multiple times over the course of her life in A.A. Confiding in a sponsor is in keeping with A.A.’s philosophy that one person cannot successfully live a sober life without the aide of another alcoholic. Indeed, in discussing whether an A.A. member can admit her “wrongs” to God directly, Alcoholics Anonymous takes the position that a member will likely not stay sober “without a fearless admission of our defects to another human being” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 56).<sup>3</sup> Thus the

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<sup>3</sup> It is acceptable in A.A. that when admitting the nature of one’s wrongdoings that the alcoholic may choose to disclose them to a person outside of A.A. such as a priest or a doctor (A.A., 2001: 74).

combination of group meetings, the application of the Twelve Steps, and private meetings with the sponsor lay the foundation by which the recovering alcoholic stays sober.

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Before I move on to discuss the dilemma of living authentically in A.A., it is interesting to note the similarities of A.A. with certain tribal cultures. There are numerous analogies to be found in Van Gennep's book, *The Rites of Passage*. For example, when the Ainu greeted each other, the greeting symbolized a religious act, separating members from the outside world, not unlike members of A.A. who introduce themselves as alcoholics (33). In some Australian tribes, the "novice" of the group was considered to be "dead," and went through a series of "physical and mental weakening" after which he was "resurrected" and initiated into the group (75). A.A. operates in a similar way as it has its members renounce their drinking, examine their "character defects," make amends to those they've "wronged," and finally, as a result of the twelve steps, undergo a "spiritual awakening." As the A.A. member progresses through his first months of sobriety, he receives a "chip" or coin to mark his 30 day, six month or year "anniversary." This is a similar practice to the Melanesians who marked rites of passage with an exchange of coins (84). Perhaps most significantly to A.A. were early Christians who experienced rituals that separated them from the "non-Christian world," where a member was "gradually instructed [and] his 'ears were opened.'" (94). Again, this is quite similar to A.A.'s "closed" meetings which are comprised only of alcoholics who experience a "spiritual awakening" after practicing the twelve steps.

## **Authenticity and the Surrender of the Will**

A.A. considers willfulness a hallmark of alcoholism (A.A., 2001: 62). The paradox of getting one's life under control in A.A. is to surrender self-power. Once the alcoholic admits that drink has defeated him and that he is "powerless" over its influences, he faces the choice of turning his will over to God. Once the alcoholic does that, God is in charge of his life, or so the alcoholic believes.

In her discussion of the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Warnock refers to the three stages of life through which Kierkegaard believed human beings may eventually pass (7). In the "aesthetic" stage, a person is most concerned with the "here and now" of life, the pleasures that are immediately of this world. At the next level, a person realizes her place in ethical society and abides by its laws, though as Warnock states, there is "no transcendental backing" (6). Arriving at the third level, a person finds herself on the brink of faith and may choose to "take the leap," thus living her life believing in God. What's important, Warnock says, is that the *individual* decides herself to make the choice, and that her "conversion" to faith be "genuine" (7). In Chapter 1, I looked at Kierkegaard's belief that a person who does not become himself denies God, because she denies possibility. It is likely that in Kierkegaard's view, the alcoholic who sees the illusions of alcoholism and freely chooses a life of faith in A.A. would be making an authentic choice. However, authenticity would be problematic for the alcoholic who is "forced into" A.A., and "works the program," because she is pressured by the other.

But say this particular type of alcoholic "fakes it to make it?" What if after surrendering his will and practicing the twelve steps of A.A. the alcoholic begins to undergo a spiritual conversion? Indeed, A.A.'s 12<sup>th</sup> step states that the alcoholic will have



undergone a “spiritual awakening as the result of [the] steps.” In A.A. terms, what does it mean to experience a spiritual awakening? The *Big Book* refers to this awakening as “a personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism” (A.A., 2001: 567). But this “personality change” is experienced because of an “immediate and overwhelming God-consciousness” (A.A., 2001: 567). A.A. states that “most of our experiences are what psychologist William James calls the ‘educational variety’ because they develop slowly over a period of time” (A.A., 2001: 567). If, as A.A. says, the alcoholic is drinking because he finds himself spiritually bereft and is attempting to fill the void inside, then seeking out God is an authentic pursuit whether the alcoholic intends it or not. Using the A.A. way—turning one’s will over to God—it is only natural that God fills the void and a spiritual conversion takes place. Because A.A. firmly believes in the existence of God, it does not matter if the alcoholic initially believes but that he *comes to believe*. A.A. makes this clear in its book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

“Relieved of the alcohol obsession, their lives unaccountably transformed, they came to believe in a Higher Power, and most of them began to talk of God (28).

A.A. assumes the existence of God and states that there will be positive results for the recovering alcoholic. It excludes the individuality of the alcoholic. It does this most noticeably in the *Big Book*’s chapter “We Agnostics,” by creating a double bind for the alcoholic individual. It does this by stating that though A.A. accepts agnostics and atheists, they are actually on a false, illogical track:

When...the perfectly logical assumption is suggested that underneath the material world and life as we see it, there is an All Powerful, Guiding, Creative Intelligence, right there our perverse streak comes to the surface and we laboriously set out to convince ourselves it isn’t so (A.A., 2001: 49).

On the one hand, A.A. says that it welcomes agnostics; however, the agnostic is then told that she is wrong. A.A. doesn't so much argue for the existence of God as accuse the agnostic alcoholic that she is "perverse" in her thinking. This assertion denies the individual thinking of the alcoholic by completely dismissing her possibilities for logic in relation to the existence of God. A.A. develops this idea further by attacking, really negating, intellectualism and science:

We read wordy books and indulge in windy arguments, thinking we believe this universe needs no God to explain it. Were our contentions true, it would follow that life originated out of nothing, means nothing, and proceeds nowhere (49).

This argument is itself illogical. To say that because one does not believe in God is not the same thing as saying that "nothing matters," or that life has no meaning (even if one does indeed think life is meaningless, this thinking implies that life *does* have meaning). In addition, talk about life having meaning is independent of whether something "outside" does exist. Furthermore, the existence of God does not necessarily assign value—existentially speaking—because it is we humans who assign value to an object each time we make a choice (Sartre 54). But the Big Book denies this value:

Instead of regarding ourselves as intelligent agents, spearheads of God's ever advancing Creation, we agnostics and atheists chose to believe that our human intelligence was the last word, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of all. Rather vain of us, wasn't it (49)?

Why is this vain, and does saying it make it so? Just because A.A. says that God exists doesn't prove that God exists, nor does it make it so. The double bind for the agnostic alcoholic is clarified as A.A. concludes its point:

We talked of intolerance, while we were intolerant ourselves. We missed the reality and beauty of the forest because we were diverted by the ugliness of some of its trees. We never gave the spiritual side of life a fair hearing (50).

So, if the alcoholic does not believe in God, then he is being intolerant, but if he believes in God, he is being tolerant (nowhere is it considered that A.A. is itself being intolerant by negating the value of the agnostic's disbelief in God). With such a double bind before him, how can the agnostic alcoholic choose authentically without further diluting his conscious awareness?

Pressured by A.A. to turn over his will to God, the non-believing alcoholic finds himself uncomfortably squeezed:

...after a while we had to face the fact that we must find a spiritual basis of life—or else (44).

For A.A., the “or else,” means certain death (66), and for the alcoholic that may indeed be true. But A.A. pushes this particular alcoholic to adopt a way of living that is not true to her beliefs. This is not only true if she adopts the A.A. belief system, but in the Kierkegaardian spirit, if she turns away from A.A. and continues to drink, she is remaining in a life of illusion, therefore she is being inauthentic. She finds herself in yet another double bind.

The unfortunate news is that inauthentic choice is unavoidable and inescapable for the alcoholic who finds himself in such a dilemma. If he chooses not to choose, he is in bad faith. If he chooses to remain in active alcoholism, he is choosing a life that is not free from the slavery of addiction. And if he chooses to accept the A.A. way of life, he makes a choice away from authenticity. However, this latter choice is offset by what it involves: A consciousness that is struggling with despair in the Kierkegaardian sense is closer to “salvation” than one that is mired in the oblivion of the alcoholic state.

## **The Alcoholic Mirror**

The act of one alcoholic helping another is central to recovery in A.A. This relationship allows for the freedom that the alcoholic does not experience with the “other” in her life outside of A.A. As Denzin points out, the practicing alcoholic and her other are trapped in an “alcoholic situation,” involving four revolving patterns of interaction: The alcoholic openly drinks in front of the other; the alcoholic hides her drinking from the other; the other witnesses the alcoholic when she is sober; and the alcoholic maintains a level of “normal intoxication,” that the other deems “normal and acceptable” (123-124). All of these situations place the other in a constant state of watchfulness, suspicion, and distrust in relation to the drinking alcoholic. The alcoholic situation is reinforced each time the alcoholic drinks. In A.A., the recovering alcoholic is introduced to relationships that are free of these destructive cycles. It is the *nondrinking* that brings these alcoholics together. The recovering alcoholic in A.A. no longer denies that she is separate from others and the weekly meetings where she must continually proclaim herself as alcoholic keeps her aware of her condition; no longer does she hide it (“denial”) from herself. And in this heightened state of consciousness, she is able to transcend her alcoholism in her relationship with God.

Or is she? The continual proclamation at A.A. meetings when the member introduces himself as alcoholic places the alcoholism in the center of the individual’s identity, thus wiping out his individuality and making him a part of a community of alcoholics. Indeed, it may not be God who is at the center of his life, but the notion that he is alcoholic. The others—the recovering alcoholics—in his A.A. community are constant reminders, mirrors, of his state.

Is the alcoholic ever then free of her condition? Certainly, the sober alcoholic is free of the immediate and resulting destructive effects of alcohol. But the A.A. construct is designed to place her alcoholism at the forefront of her mind lest she forget what plagues her (A.A., 2001: 24). In this view, alcohol still controls her life and how she proceeds to conduct her affairs although she is sober. She is never really free. This directly relates to the idea that the alcoholic is a “sick” person who is never cured of alcoholism but is only given a daily reprieve from her illness.

### **Alcohol as a Symptom**

Once in A.A., the alcoholic learns that his drinking is “but a symptom” of his spiritual disease (A.A., 2001: 64). The twelve steps of taking a “moral inventory,” making amends to others, and continually seeking out God through meditation and prayer are ways to treat the spiritual malady.<sup>4</sup> As Dr. Silkworth states in the *Big Book’s* “The Doctor’s Opinion:”

“...unless this person can experience an entire psychic change there is very little hope of his recovery” (xxix).

The notion that alcoholism is a disease of the spirit is different from the scientific theories that it is an illness caused by genetics and physiological abnormalities. In fact, since there has been no medical “cure” for alcoholism, it may even make sense that it is a spiritual sickness since it often corrupts the alcoholic’s sense of morals in connection with his relationship to himself and others.<sup>5</sup> But by explaining the alcoholic’s “disease” as a spiritual state, A.A. simultaneously blames him for his alcoholism and relieves him

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<sup>4</sup> A.A. not only believes that the alcoholic is sick, but that most nonalcoholics are themselves sick. I will discuss this idea further in Chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Denzin has noted that violence is frequently associated with alcoholism (137-138).

of his responsibility of his condition. This is another example of how the recovering alcoholic in A.A. faces nearly impossible choices for leading an authentic life.

Told she is sick, the alcoholic learns that she drinks because that is the symptom of her alcoholism. Giving up drinking is not enough. The alcoholic must live by the steps of A.A. to undergo a “spiritual awakening,” and “carry [the] message to other alcoholics.”

In relation to A.A.’s view of an omnipotent God, this outlook may be valid. In his book, *The Myth of Mental Illness*, Szasz states that illness may be to a person’s advantage:

...when man...is healthy, independent, rich, and proud, then God...shall be strict with him. But should man be sick, dependent, poor, and humble, then God shall care for him and protect him (169).

Responsibility is thus removed from the sick alcoholic. God will take care of him if he surrenders his will and practices the steps of A.A. Once this choice to have God take control of his life is made, his future choices are in a sense *negated* because whatever decisions he makes, all are God’s will. His choices as such are made in bad faith because they are not really his choices at all. This surrender to God is a form of determinism.

I have argued that labeling oneself as a sick alcoholic in the community of A.A. is a form of sacrificing one’s individuality. But what if the opposite is true? In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag writes that the romanticization of an illness has been viewed as a way of making a person more “interesting” thus more individualized (31). Perhaps the drinker who defines himself as an alcoholic sees himself as individualized because his illness makes him “special” or “interesting?” Wouldn’t this just be another way for the alcoholic, though sober in A.A., to keep himself separate from those who are not alcoholic? In A.A., it is common for recovering alcoholics to see nonalcoholics as “outsiders” because they have not lived the alcoholic’s experiences (Denzin 253). It is

possible that, once the alcoholic passes through recovery, he may begin to feel that he is even healthier than nonalcoholics, further separating himself from them. It is possible to see this idea in support and against authenticity. If the alcoholic leans on the notion that he is diseased, thus he is special, there is no choice involved. This would be inauthentic. On the other hand, if “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (Sartre 28), then his choices to recover in A.A. have further separated him from the “outside world,” making them authentic in terms of his defining himself as a recovering alcoholic.

Still, if every decision stems from the idea that one is an alcoholic, wouldn’t each decision then be inauthentic or made in bad faith? Not necessarily. Sartre allowed that people have been given a set of pre-conditions (46) in life. For example, it is not that a person is born into poverty, but it’s the choices she makes as a result that define her; it is not that a person has the “disease of alcoholism,” but how she chooses to live her life having been dealt that particular hand.

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The idea of recovering from alcoholism in Alcoholics Anonymous is by no means a simple decision for the person who must make the choice to do so. Whether by finding himself at an A.A. meeting because he has been coerced into going by the other or ordered by the court, or whether he has chosen to attend himself, the idea of turning over his will to God is complex and not without consequences for the state of being authentic. But I argue that authentic questions are not just a matter for the alcoholic, but for the organization of A.A. itself. If A.A. is to offer the recovering alcoholic a life free from dishonesty and denial—a more authentic life—then its doctrine must reflect the same. This, however, is not always the case. I will explore why in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER THREE: GETTING RELIGION

Get God or else face death, jails, or institutions—that’s the strong message A.A. sends in the beginning of the chapter, “We Agnostics,” in the *Big Book*:

To one who feels he is an agnostic or atheist, such an experience seems impossible, but to continue as he is means disaster, especially if he is an alcoholic of the hopeless variety. To be doomed to an alcoholic death or to live on a spiritual basis are not always easy alternatives to face (44).

I discussed the problems for the recovering alcoholic in A.A. in Chapter 2. Now I turn my focus to the authenticity of A.A.’s message, particularly its message of living a “spiritual” life. To understand A.A.’s emphasis on God and spirituality, it’s helpful to look at how A.A. started and developed.

### Founding Fathers

The idea of alcoholics helping each other stay sober did not originate with A.A. but came out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s Washingtonian movement (Cheever 12, 202). The movement formed in 1838 and taught that divine intervention was a way to keep sober. During the time of the Washingtonian movement’s founding, the temperance movement, anti-alcohol in its message, was especially popular in the United States. The Washingtonian movement eventually split apart, but in the early 1900s, The Oxford Group popped up addressing alcoholism in similar ways (Cheever 129). Founded by a Lutheran minister, The Oxford Group was Christian-based.<sup>6</sup> The group counseled alcoholics through prayer and suggested ways for them to live. In 1935, A.A. founders Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith met while in the Oxford Group. Both men were alcoholic.

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<sup>6</sup> The group is now known as Moral Re-Armament though it has expanded to include other faiths and belief systems. It is currently more of a political and social group (“Oxford Group,” Wikipedia).



Through various relationships, Wilson had learned about a spiritual approach to treat alcoholism.<sup>7</sup> Wilson also believed that chronic drinkers could help one another recover from alcoholism.<sup>8</sup> The men founded A.A. on June 10, 1935. They and other A.A. members went on to write *Alcoholics Anonymous*, or the *Big Book*, which was published in 1939. The *Big Book* contains information about how A.A. works, and as Cheever has written, contains a strong “evangelical...and self-help strain” (235). In writing the book, Wilson also drew on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James (A.A., 2001: 567-568). It’s significant to note that the first 164 pages of the *Big Book* have not been revised although the personal stories of alcoholics in the second section of the book have changed over the years to include a broader range of racial and gender diversity. The *Big Book* remains a best seller.

### **How It Works**

At the beginning of an A.A. meeting, it is common for members to read a passage from “How It Works,” or Chapter 5, in the *Big Book*. The reading is an important part of each meeting because it introduces the newcomer to A.A.’s recovery plan and reminds regulars that they must continue to practice the twelve steps to remain sober. At the outset, A.A. establishes that its program never fails; only people do:

Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way (58).

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<sup>7</sup> This approach was suggested to an alcoholic named Rowland. by Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung (Cheever 242).

<sup>8</sup> Wilson also had learned, through Dr. William Silkworth who wrote the *Big Book*’s “Doctor’s Opinion,” that alcoholism is an “allergy” (Cheever 131).

In this reading, the alcoholic is told that if he does not accept the A.A. way, he will fail. Not only will he fail because he does not accept A.A., but he will fail because he is “constitutionally incapable of being honest,” with himself. “How it Works” sets up a dilemma for anyone who has relapsed in A.A. or who might be having second thoughts about membership in the program. This is so because A.A. states that it has the truth and to reject A.A. is to reject the truth:

Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely (58).

Thus, the *Big Book* says, A.A. is the authority on alcoholism; it and God are the cure:

Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful! without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find Him now (58-59)!

“How it Works” then lists the twelve steps for recovery and “make[s] clear three pertinent ideas:”

- (a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.
- (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.
- (c) That God could and would if He were sought (60).

At this point, the alcoholic must decide if she is going to choose or reject A.A.’s belief system. If she accepts it, she will stop drinking with help from God and practice the twelve steps. If she rejects A.A., the common belief is that she will continue to drink, although Denzin acknowledges that some alcoholics do recover outside of A.A. but just how they do that is not clearly understood (xxix). But the question here is whether A.A. has laid out an authentic case for the alcoholic to stop drinking. Is it authentic to say that those who don’t “completely give themselves to this simple program,” are “those who do

not recover?” Is it authentic to state that those who not accept A.A.’s program are “usually...constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves?” I believe this is an inauthentic argument for several reasons. First, when A.A. says that failure is due to lack of compliance on the part of the alcoholic, this is disingenuous because it blames the alcoholic without taking any responsibility for what might have gone wrong with program. It does this by placing God at the center of the program. If the alcoholic fails, it can’t be the program’s fault because God is the basis for the program and God never fails. That is how this sort of logic goes. But that is like saying that the car you just bought from the dealership broke down because you were a bad driver. It ignores that there might be problems with the dealership, or with the car itself. In A.A., to find flaws in the program is equivalent to finding fault with God.

Second, by stating that a person who doesn’t recover in the A.A. program must be incapable of self-honesty, A.A. claims not just to know more about the alcoholic than the alcoholic knows himself, but to know the *truth* or the many truths that A.A. discusses throughout the *Big Book*. For example, in “How it Works, A.A. says that it is required that “we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success” and that “the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot” (61-62). The implication here is that if the alcoholic chooses to reject A.A., his choice is not valid or honest because he is in “self-will.” This is a form of manipulation because it states that there is something wrong with the alcoholic who does not accept A.A. In addition, as I discussed in Chapter 2, this type of thinking completely negates the value of the individual—it is only in deference to A.A. (thus to God) that the alcoholic is being honest with himself.

What about the alcoholic who discovers that he does not want to drink but he also does not agree with A.A.'s philosophies? A.A.'s claims here are ironic. A.A. encourages the agnostic, for example, to be more "open-minded" to the possibility of a higher power. But if God opens up possibility (Kierkegaard 173), then there may be other recovery options open to the alcoholic apart from A.A. (unfortunately, American society does not fully engage such options which I'll discuss in Chapter 5). In saying that the alcoholic does not recover because she rejects A.A., A.A. is itself closing off any other possibility of freedom, even closing off an idea of God as being bigger than A.A..

### **A.A. and Religion as Spirituality**

Although A.A. says it "is not a religious organization" (A.A., 2001: XX), in 1999 the U.S. Supreme Court sent a signal that it may not agree. The court upheld a federal ruling that says the law cannot force an atheistic defendant to attend A.A. since the meetings are religious in nature (American Atheists). It has been traditional for the U.S. court system to sentence alcoholic defendants, such as drunk drivers, to attend A.A. meetings. In this 1990 case, Robert Warner, an atheist, pleaded guilty to driving drunk and to driving without a license. An Orange County, New York judge sentenced Warner to probation. Warner was also ordered to abstain from alcohol and attend A.A. meetings. Warner attended the meetings but eventually sued the county in federal court because he believed the strong religious content of A.A. violated his rights. The courts eventually agreed with Warner. Justice Leval of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circuit Court pointed out that "the evidence showed that every meeting included at least one explicitly Christian Prayer," arguing that this went against the claim that A.A. was nonsectarian in nature (American Atheists).

Legal precedent, however, was not set in this case and it is possible that similar issues will be raised in future legal proceedings.

The issue of whether A.A. is religious is of concern as it relates to the question of authenticity within the A.A. message. This is so because A.A. states that it is not religious while at the same time firmly placing belief in God at the center of its program. The *Big Book* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, known in A.A. as the *12 and 12*, offer numerous examples of this mixed message. For example, in “Tradition Two,” A.A. states:

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience (132).

A.A. has no board of directors or CEO, and each group is self-governing with decisions made by consensus. With “Tradition Two,” A.A. collectively does what it asks each A.A. member to do individually—surrender its will to a higher power. This in itself is not inauthentic. What makes it inauthentic is A.A.’s declaration that it is “not a religious organization.” When God becomes the focus and the way of life for a group, it certainly could be argued that it is religious. A.A. answers this argument by stating that one need not believe in God, but in a higher power—any higher power. But this is disingenuous because A.A. so widely uses the term “God,” and because, although A.A. says it doesn’t align itself with any particular faith, Christianity is clearly its model and preferred religion. Evidence showed in the Warner case that Christian prayer was included at each A.A. meeting. Indeed, it is common to close A.A. meetings with the Lord’s Prayer from the book of Matthew in the New Testament. When a group joins hands and prays the primary prayer of a major religion, it is certainly indicative of a unilateral belief system. The fact that the group does so at the conclusion of a meeting

places even more emphasis on the prayer because what is most important to say, we often say last. For a newcomer to attend a meeting and hear testimony that he can pray to whichever higher power he likes only to find himself in the middle of the Lord's Prayer at meeting's end surely must be a confusing experience. What is the comfort here, not just for the agnostic or atheist, but the Jew? How authentic is it to bow your head and recite a Christian prayer if you are Jewish? As difficult as this mixed message is, it is less covert than the following example.

First, it is important to look at Step 11 of the twelve steps:

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out (96).

In the *12 and 12*, it is suggested that the alcoholic practice this step by looking:

...at a really good prayer...Its author is a man who for several hundred years now has been rated as a saint. We won't be biased or scared off by that fact, because although he was not an alcoholic he did, like us, go through the emotional wringer. And as he came out the other side of that painful experience, this prayer was his expression of what he could then see, feel, and wish to become (99).

The book then reprints a copy of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, however, nowhere is there a reference providing the reader with the identity of the prayer's author. Known as the "11<sup>th</sup> Step Prayer," if one wishes to find out its origins, one must look elsewhere. It is difficult to act authentically when mired in duplicity. The way A.A. handles this introduction of a "really good prayer," concealing its authorship by omission, is inauthentic alcoholic behavior. At best it could be read as self-deceptive—A.A. is in denial of its own religiosity. Sadly, there is a sinister quality to the introduction. A.A. keeps the identity of St. Francis a secret from the reader. This implies knowledge that despite A.A.'s stance that it is not religious and doesn't align itself with any one faith,

religious intent exists. It also deceives the agnostic reader who has been asked to remain open-minded about God and prayer. Told to use his own perception of God or a higher power, he finds that A.A.'s interpretation is Christian; that in Steps 3 and 11, when A.A. talks of a God "as we understood Him," it may be a God that A.A. collectively understands, not individually, despite its arguments to the contrary.

Further examples of this kind of inauthenticity exist in A.A.'s primary literature. In the *12 and 12*, the chapter on "Tradition Three"<sup>9</sup> describes an agnostic named Ed, a member of A.A. during the organization's early years. A cantankerous atheist, Ed astounds and annoys members of his group by remaining sober despite his belief that he doesn't need the "God nonsense" (143). Fellow A.A. members wait for Ed to get drunk because they can't believe he is able to stay sober without the help of God. When Ed goes out of town on a business trip, he finds himself in trouble. Ed calls members of the group for help but they decide to "Leave him alone! Let him try it by himself for once; maybe he'll learn a lesson" (144)! Two weeks later, Ed shows up at a member's house. It turns out that he had:

...holed up in a cheap hotel. After all his pleas for help had been rebuffed...he tossed on his bed, his hand brushed the bureau near by, touching a book. Opening the book, he read. It was a Gideon Bible...It was the year 1938. He hasn't had a drink since (144-145).

Although the point of this story is that A.A. learned that Ed's desire to stop drinking was the only requirement for membership—despite his atheism—there is another, underlying message which shows that while A.A. says atheists and agnostics are welcome, Ed turned out okay because he eventually found God through the Gideon Bible. Indeed the members asked:

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<sup>9</sup> Tradition Three reads as follows: "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking (139).

“What if we had actually succeeded in throwing Ed out for blasphemy?  
What would have happened to him and all the others he later helped” (145)?

There are similar messages in the *Big Book's* chapter, “We Agnostics.” One recounts “the experience of a man who thought he was an atheist” (55). This man, a minister’s son, suffered from alcoholism. One night, he asks himself, “*Who are you to say there is no God*” (56)? He is then “overwhelmed by a conviction of the Presence of God” (56). As a result, the man quit drinking because “God had restored his sanity” (57). There are a couple of things going on here. First, we have another message that even though A.A. says it accepts agnostics and atheists into its fold, the truth really is that they will eventually be converted to the A.A. belief system. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, people who think they are atheist don’t *really* believe that because, “deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of God” (55). This again is an example of A.A.’s own alcoholic inauthentic behavior. A.A. says it’s okay to be an atheist when they really don’t believe that anyone is *fundamentally* atheistic. This is a form of bad faith because it discounts the idea that anyone has a real choice when it comes to belief in God. After all, if someone only “thinks” she is an atheist, and deep down has a true idea of God, it is determined that if she is open-minded, she will come around to believing in God. If she is not open-minded, she is deceiving herself. Either way, there is no real freedom here. It’s another form of the “split self.” One thinks one is something but it is only self-delusion. This dilemma also leads one to wonder if A.A. is not only deceiving the atheistic alcoholic but deceiving itself in its duplicitous message.

Of course, there is another way of looking at this. As discussed in Chapter 1, if we use the Kierkegaardian model, the practicing alcoholic denies God because in drinking he denies possibility. The alcoholic who continues to drink is not fully conscious and so has



lost God. Using this model, A.A. would be authentic in what it is saying about the idea of God lying deep within everyone. It is not this belief that is inauthentic, but A.A.'s insistence that atheism and agnosticism are accepted in A.A.—A.A. has shown that it really doesn't believe there are true atheists and agnostics. If a person chooses to remain in what A.A. would consider an intolerant state by being prejudiced to the existence of God, then that person won't recover from alcoholism and A.A. won't work for him. This is another double bind because if the alcoholic chooses the A.A. way, she acknowledges that she really believed in God all along, and if she chooses not to follow the A.A. way, she is self-deceiving (according to A.A.).

### **Choosing the A.A. Way: Just Who's Doing the Work?**

In what are known as "The Promises," the alcoholic who accepts the A.A. way of life is told:

We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness... We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves (AA, 2001: 84).

It is undoubtedly true that when an alcoholic stops drinking, she has removed a destructive force from her life. But is God really doing for her what she could not do for herself? Isn't *she* the one who refuses the drink? Isn't she the one, if she follows A.A.'s steps to list her "character defects," and make amends to those she hurt through her drinking, who is doing the work? Isn't she the one who is making the choice? Perhaps she is acting in God's will, an idea that is impossible to prove just as the existence of God is impossible to prove. If she is acting in faith, it is still *she* who is acting. If by ceasing to drink, her relationships are repaired and her ability to hold a job is improved, she is still the one who has put forth the work.

Levy has argued that “the alcoholic of Alcoholics Anonymous does not exist...because there is no such thing as an irresistible or compulsive urge to use drugs [or alcohol]” (137). For Levy, because of A.A.’s belief that God or a higher power relieves the urge to drink, it “provides an excuse for every relapse” (138). Responsibility for the alcoholic is removed because the freedom to choose is taken away—the higher power must stop the alcoholic from drinking. Self-sufficiency, A.A. says in the *12 and 12*, doesn’t work:

...first take a look at the results normal people are getting from self-sufficiency. Everywhere [the alcoholic] sees people filled with anger and fear, society breaking up into warring fragments...The philosophy of self-sufficiency is not paying off. Plainly enough, it is a bone-crushing juggernaut whose final achievement is ruin ( 37).

As Levy points out, this can be a “harmful myth,” because it sets up the alcoholic to believe that she doesn’t have control over her choices regarding drinking. Again, this is deterministic thinking which may result in bad faith.

### **People are Sick**

At the beginning of the *Big Book*, A.A. states that “the alcoholic is a very sick person” (xiii). This fits with the disease model of alcoholism. However, in the *12 and 12*, A.A. goes on to say that it believes that “all people...are to some extent emotionally ill as well as frequently wrong” (92). This view of humanity as generally emotionally sick is also an inauthentic view because as well as removing responsibility from the alcoholic for his drinking, it removes responsibility for others because they are “sick”:

We realized that the people who wronged us were perhaps spiritually sick. Though we did not like their symptoms and the way these disturbed us, they, like ourselves, were sick too (A.A., 2001: 67).

So, if a nonalcoholic offended the drinker:

...we said to ourselves: "This is a sick man. How can I be helpful to him. God save me from being angry. Thy will be done (67).

How does one live freely in such a world? How does one make authentic choices? If as Sartre said, "existence precedes essence"—we define ourselves in the world by our choices—this sort of thinking is inauthentic and is once again in bad faith—"I am sick and therefore, can't do anything about it." In this case, both the alcoholic and the "normal" person are exonerated from their individual actions because they are sick and thus, have no choice.

There is another problem with this line of thinking which leads to inauthenticity. As Denzin notes, because A.A. members believe that the world is filled with other emotionally sick (and alcoholic) people, the recovering alcoholic in A.A. may believe that he is "better able to deal with the world than those who have not yet found A.A." (59). This sets up an attitude of superiority, a way of thinking that carries over to religious or spiritual convictions; as Dr. Bob Smith states in the *Big Book*:

If you think you are an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptic, or have any other form of intellectual pride which keeps you from accepting what is in this book, I feel sorry for you (181).

Dr. Bob, as he is called in A.A., places himself above non-believers by expressing his pity for them. This sort of view not only creates attitudes that those who don't believe in God are not as well off as A.A. believers, but that those who are not in A.A. aren't faring well either. Isn't this itself a form of "intellectual pride," which A.A. warns, keeps the alcoholic drinking?

The A.A. alcoholic also believes that an alcoholic who is not in A.A. will likely not have serenity and will thus be a "dry drunk" (Denzin 172). A belief system that "A.A. is the only way," is constructed. This "us and them," philosophy creates a form of

alienation from the rest of society. Just as the alcoholic was alienated when she was drinking, in A.A. she is alienated from all but those in the program. This is another form of the inauthentic alcoholic double-life—the life lived inside and outside the A.A. group. Outside the group, she may act as if she is a “regular” member of society—indeed, the anonymity of A.A. makes this possible—but inside the group she is a known recovering alcoholic.

It is impossible for the recovering alcoholic in A.A. to escape the identity he assumes as an alcoholic. Each time he speaks at an A.A. meeting, he must announce himself as an alcoholic. It is not unusual for some alcoholics even to place their name after the alcoholic identification. For example:

“Hello, I’m an alcoholic whose name is\_\_.”

No matter how many times an alcoholic shares comments at a meeting, he must reintroduce himself as an alcoholic. This practice reminds him—and the group—that he is first and foremost an alcoholic. He must never forget it so that he does not drink again. If we apply Kierkegaardian philosophy, this constant identification strips the individuality of all the alcoholics in attendance at A.A. meetings. This is so because it ignores the differences of each member of the group and it is these differences that make us authentic individuals. In A.A., if an alcoholic is unique, he is only unique because he is alcoholic. Whomever he is outside of A.A.—married or unmarried, artist or teacher—is secondary. As a result, his entire life is explained by his alcoholism. Each statement he makes inside of the meeting—and outside with his sponsor—is a consequence of his alcoholism. His recovery is ongoing and endless. Freedom from alcoholism, no matter if

one is recovering or not, does not exist. The possibility of making a choice that is not connected to alcoholism is negated.

### **Objectivity, Subjectivity, and the Nature of Faith**

As Warnock explains, in Kierkegaardian objectivity, a person acts in accordance with society's rules (8). She does what she does because she is told to do it. Labeling oneself as a result comes naturally. But if faith in God suspends the rational—one cannot prove that God exists—then Kierkegaard believed that faith was the highest level of living. For Kierkegaard, faith is subjective because one cannot learn it; it has to come from a conversion experience (qtd. in Warnock 11) which involves a person seeing herself as an individual made up of her experiences. In this way, Kierkegaard stated what Sartre and other existentialists would later claim, that a person is defined by her choices.

When A.A. tells an alcoholic that the only way she can recover is through a belief in God and the alcoholic chooses to accept this, her choice may not be authentic. This is because faith must come out of subjective experience—a person must come to a point where she feels that spiritual transcendence is the only valuable way to live life. If the alcoholic makes this choice because she has genuinely come to believe that, her choice is authentic; she is choosing to honor her individuality. However, her individuality is continually negated in A.A. with rules and labeling. Her authenticity is in question each time she announces herself to be the same as other alcoholics in the A.A. group whether by introduction or testimony. Yet outside of the A.A. group, this may not be the case at all. If she relates her story to someone who is not an alcoholic, she is different from that person. She only becomes inauthentic when she thinks of herself as being *just like* the

alcoholics inside of A.A. If she does not see herself as independent from them, she is looking at herself in an inauthentic manner.

### **The A.A. Way**

A.A. believes that alcoholics need constant reminders that they can never drink again. The *Big Book* puts it this way:

*We are unable, at certain times, to bring ourselves into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. We are without defense against that first drink (24).*

Although A.A. does not state in its primary literature that a recovering alcoholic must attend meetings for the rest of her life, within the groups it is strongly encouraged. Continual practice of the twelve steps is common and many recovering alcoholics in A.A. go through the process of the steps multiple times with different sponsors. As stated, the recovery is conditional on acceptance and belief in God or a higher power. But what if a recovering alcoholic in A.A. finds comfort in religion outside of A.A.? The *Big Book* says: “Not all of us join religious bodies, but most of us favor such memberships” (A.A. 28). It is not surprising that A.A. would “favor such memberships,” since it is strongly God-based, but if an A.A. member at some point chooses not to attend A.A. in favor of another religious organization, this would be discouraged within the group. The predominant feeling in A.A. (and in much of society) is that A.A. is the only legitimate way to deal with alcoholism. This often translates into permanent membership within A.A. since the organization believes that one is an alcoholic for life. Newcomers will find many members of A.A. who have attended meetings for multiple years (these members are known as “old-timers”). However, discouraging members from leaving the group because of the belief that only A.A. can successfully deal with alcoholism may be

inauthentic. First, it prevents free choice. Additionally, an A.A. member may leave the group because he has found a more spiritually authentic way to live sober elsewhere.

Who is to say that A.A. has a lock on God? For if it is God that takes away the desire to drink and enables the alcoholic to maintain sobriety, why wouldn't God do the same outside of the A.A. group?

It is at this point other factors come into play. A.A. also has a fundamental belief that help for an alcoholic can only come from another alcoholic (and God). If that is the case, then why couldn't alcoholics help each other without A.A. and the twelve steps? There are, in fact, other groups such as Smart Recovery and Women for Sobriety that offer alternatives to A.A. Isn't it inauthentic of A.A. to suggest that it is the *only* true method of recovery? And just as there is a strong anti-intellectual strain throughout A.A., there is an anti-scientific one as well. Since A.A. believes that alcoholism is a disease of the mind, body, and spirit, it is doubtful that the organization would accept a medicine that could cure alcoholism. Indeed, for a group that says there is no cure for alcoholism, it implies it has the only "cure."

One finds a stubborn resistance to change within A.A. Indeed, the fact that A.A. has not changed the main text of the *Big Book* or the *12 and 12* is disturbing when one considers that the text is gender-biased. The gender-bias of the A.A. text goes beyond the references to "he" and "him;" it is a text that is particularly and perhaps strikingly, masculine. But society has changed since A.A.'s inception in 1935, and as Jerslid notes, women with careers outside the home are 67 percent more likely to drink heavily than women who work solely in the home (116). The masculine nature of A.A. needs to be addressed. I will do so in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES: WOMEN IN A.A.

As I've shown in this thesis so far, the possibilities of living an authentic life for the alcoholic are ridden with dilemma. But for the alcoholic woman recovering in A.A., the very nature of her identity is at stake. With its roots in the Protestant church, A.A. and its masculine use of the word God (for example, the higher power is referred to as "the Master" on page 142 of the *12 and 12*), a woman finds herself surrounded by patriarchal traditions. In this chapter, I will look at the language of A.A. for it is there that its gender bias, sexism, and patriarchal identity are most firmly rooted.

### He Said, He Said

If a woman is to thrive in A.A., she must work harder than her male counterpart. At first glance, this seems to be similar to the old expression that "women have to work twice as hard as men to be a success." But it is more than that because the language of A.A. dictates that women must adapt to an organization that is gender biased. This is the case not just because the main texts of A.A., the *Big Book* and the *12 and 12*, use the traditional pronoun, "he," but because the literature and its *ideas* are masculine in nature. These main texts were written by men, most notably by Bill Wilson. When A.A. started in 1935, men made up the majority of its membership (Cheever 189). The literature addressed itself primarily to male alcoholics. Since the literature is read, almost as one would read the Christian bible, at A.A. meetings, problems for women automatically occur. No place are these problems more glaring than in the *Big Book's* Chapter 8, "To Wives." This chapter is geared toward women who are married to male alcoholics. This is in keeping with the view in A.A. that alcoholism is a "family illness" (Denzin 192). It



is important to note that this chapter is studied regularly in A.A. meetings. Women alcoholics attending A.A. meetings are told to look at “To Wives,” as if it were written, “To Husbands,” so that they may relate to their nonalcoholic partner’s sufferings.

The chapter begins by explaining:

We want the wives of Alcoholics Anonymous to address the wives of men who drink too much. What they say will apply to nearly everyone bound by ties of blood or affection to an alcoholic (104).

The chapter continues, but from the perspective of the “wives:”

As wives of Alcoholics Anonymous, we would like you to feel that we understand as perhaps few can. We want to analyze mistakes we have made. We want to leave you with the feeling that no situation is too difficult and no unhappiness too great to be overcome (104).

A woman reading this may feel that she is receiving the understanding of someone like her, the wife of an alcoholic. This is, in fact, completely untrue. “To Wives,” was written by A.A. founder Bill Wilson, despite his own wife Lois’s wishes to write it herself (Cheever 235). Throughout this chapter, Wilson poses as the wife of an alcoholic in an effort to counsel other women in this predicament. This is completely deceptive and inauthentic behavior. The woman reading this may believe that she is reading the words of another woman in a similar situation when in fact she is reading the words of Wilson—a man and an alcoholic. Wilson may have had some insight into the suffering of “the wives” of alcoholics, but he could not have possibly understood the complexity of a woman’s feelings in such a time. Before the Second World War, women were mainly housewives and did not work outside the home. They were treated as second class citizens who were to be subservient to men. It is extremely doubtful that Wilson, a stockbroker, could have had the kind of remarkable empathy it would take to live as a woman in that type of world. In addition, he was an alcoholic, “self centered in the

extreme.” How could he have possibly discerned a woman’s plight? This entire pose is so inauthentic that it wipes out any essence of authentic experience. It is a complete fiction. Wilson may indeed have been relating the stories of real women, but the essence of his own experience—a male alcoholic experience—is what comes through the language. The identity of the author is not only concealed, but the identity of the gender has been falsified. Even though he speaks as a woman, from a female perspective, Wilson cannot help but reveal his own alcoholic beliefs and male views of the world—they have made him who he is, they have preceded his essence (and Wilson not only deceives women by this false identity, he deceives himself by assuming that he understands women enough to write in their place). It is an absurd split self: the wife of an alcoholic; the recovering alcoholic; the man. “Our women folk,” as A.A. refers to them (A.A., 2001:122) are asked not only to accept this pseudo-reality but to look into themselves based on the insights of such a pseudo-woman. These “women folk” have come to include not only the wives of alcoholic men, but the female alcoholics who read this chapter, substituting the word “wife” for “husband,” or if they are gay, “partner.” They then must “split” themselves as well—as alcoholic women attempting to read masculinist narrative, applying it to their own genders and partners. This puts their own experience into a clouded world since they are asked to ignore the gender differences inherent in the language. As a result, the entire A.A. group becomes inauthentic. The male partners of alcoholic women are also told to read “To Wives,” as if it were addressed to them. The idea that a man could authentically place himself in this “woman’s” place becomes laughable. He is really placing himself in what was originally a male—Wilson’s—place, then pretending that he is female in order

to identify with it. When so much duplicity is at play, the choice toward authenticity becomes mired in confusion.

Wilson's narrative reveals masculinist ways of seeing, especially of a less "feminist" age. The narrative also betrays its low regard of women. For example, almost immediately in the chapter, the "wife" is told that she has made "mistakes." It's interesting that it's the wives' "mistakes," that are mentioned first, and not those of their alcoholic husbands. Right away, a tone of blame is established that places the woman in a less powerful position: her husband may be alcoholic, and she may have struggled to cope with his drinking, but she has made mistakes. This implies that she has been complicit in his drinking. It does so because it is spoken immediately at the beginning of the passage; and the fact that it is said at all means she is culpable. It is not unlike saying to an abused child, "Your father probably wouldn't have hit you if you hadn't been so little." Why say that at all if you weren't somehow blaming the child? This is obvious inauthentic behavior for the husband because not only does it place responsibility on the wife for the husband's drinking, it implies that she participated in his *choice* to drink. But isn't this "understandable" since we know that Wilson, a recovering alcoholic, has written the chapter?

Wilson continues, attempting to convey empathy:

...We have been driven to maudlin sympathy, to bitter resentment. Some of us veered from extreme to extreme, ever hoping that one day our loved ones would be themselves once more (105).

The fact that a wife's sympathy is "maudlin" implies that it may not be an appropriate response to her partner's (Wilson's) alcoholism. Yet since she has been

“driven” to the sympathy, there is a semblance that she is not fully responsible; it is also implied that she is not in control. Indeed, she has gotten herself into a mess:

Our loyalty and the desire that our husbands hold up their heads and be like other men have begotten all sorts of predicaments (105).

Wilson may have experienced “loyalty” from his wife, but this could be read as more of an instruction to women to remain loyal to their alcoholic husbands. The “wives” then tell the reader that while she has been “unselfish and self-sacrificing,” there is also the fact that:

We have told innumerable lies to protect our pride and our husbands’ reputations. We have prayed, we have begged, we have been patient...We have been hysterical (105).

“Begging,” is clearly a subservient role. And telling lies to protect pride and a loved one may well indeed be inauthentic behavior, but isn’t it Wilson who is protecting his own pride by posing as the “wife”? However, it’s the use of the word, “hysterical,” that stands out. Some in A.A. admit that the use of this word is outdated, explaining it away as just a term that was used in 1939, the year the *Big Book* was written. This may be the case but that does not make its usage in the *Big Book* any more authentic. Merriam Webster’s defines hysteria:

a psychoneurosis marked by emotional excitability and disturbances of the psychic, sensory, vasomotor, and visceral functions[:]  
behavior exhibiting overwhelming or unmanageable fear or emotional excess  
(Merriam Webster OnLine 2005)

Importantly, the word “hysteria,” originated from the Greek word, “hysterikos” which means “womb” and was referred to a condition that was “peculiar to women and caused by disturbances of the uterus” (Merriam Webster OnLine 2005). Freud popularized the term in his work but it is now considered passé (“Hysteria,” Wikipedia).

In fact, assigning the term was and remains sexist. Calling a woman “hysterical” *diminishes the value of her thoughts, feelings and reactions to an event*. It implies that the woman is wrong in her actions and not free. It also implies an opposite: a man would not act in such a way. The “hysterical” reaction even calls into question the validity of the event it inspires, as in, “Why are you getting so upset? It’s really not that big a deal.” The man who calls a woman hysterical has placed himself in a more powerful state. Using the word in this way suggests blame—“there is something wrong with you.” To use the word in the way that Wilson—and by extension, A.A. uses it—is disingenuous because 1) it denigrates the female subject; 2) it devalues her feelings; 3) it devalues the situation that has prompted her “hysterical” reaction. In A.A.’s case, this would be the alcoholic husband. The possible effects of alcoholism on her husband’s behavior—he can’t hold a job, sleeps all day, and neglects, or even abuses his wife—are deemed irrelevant. She is hysterical. Using the word, “hysterical” to describe a woman’s behavior is tantamount to saying that she is over-reacting, despite the fact that her husband treats her in an admittedly painful and often debilitating manner.

Wilson may be stating truisms about himself (or other men) by making such claims. But by devaluing the situation that enables him to call his wife “hysterical,” he lessens the wallop of his alcoholism; he implies, in effect, that alcoholism doesn’t warrant the upset. “She is hysterical” equates with “she is over-reacting.” As an alcoholic who is recovering, Wilson thereby denies his own alcoholism and its effects on others by calling its veracity into question.

Wilson moves on to another troublesome topic:

Sometimes there were other women. How heartbreaking was this discovery; how cruel to be told they understood our men as we did not (106)!

But the cruelty is twice told as Wilson tells it here. It is at this juncture that Wilson begins a more obvious turn toward the “mistakes” of the wives:

In desperation, we have even got tight ourselves—the drunk to end all drunks. The unexpected result was that our husbands seemed to like it (106).

In the masculine view, the wife’s drunk is more severe than his; indeed, it is the “drunk to end all drunks,” notwithstanding the wry admission that the husband enjoyed it. (This is a rather insulting comment since it implies that women would not understand the sexual ramifications of why a man would want to encourage a woman to use alcohol.)

Wilson continues:

...We finally sought employment ourselves as destitution faced us and our families...As animals on a treadmill, we have patiently and wearily climbed...Under these conditions we naturally made mistakes. Some of them out of ignorance of alcoholism...Had we understood the nature of the alcoholic illness, we might have behaved differently (107).

Current female and male members of A.A. read here that “wives” were forced into finding jobs for themselves and their families. While it was not typical for women to work outside the home during the time the *Big Book* was written, it certainly is the norm in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The women in this paragraph are portrayed as pathetic “animals on a treadmill,” ever patient, but they “might have behaved differently” if they had understood the “illness” of alcoholism. This certainly may be true, but it is significant to note that the focus is on the “mistakes” that women are making. This denies the alcoholic’s own freedom and responsibility: he is sick so he acts this way; had she understood his illness, she might have been more understanding *of him* (this is yet another example of a double bind). This is a chapter that is supposed to show compassion and empathy for the wives

of alcoholics yet it seems to show more sympathy for the active alcoholics as the following paragraph illustrates:<sup>10</sup>

Try not to condemn your alcoholic husband no matter what he says or does. He is just another very sick, unreasonable person. Treat him, when you can, as though he had pneumonia. When he angers you remember that he is very ill (108).

Wilson explains in more detail what he means:

The first principle of success is that you should never be angry. Even though your husband becomes unbearable and you have to leave him temporarily, you should, if you can go without rancor. Patience and good temper are most necessary (111).

These two passages are essentially ludicrous and offer a completely inauthentic viewpoint. As it has been said, they have been written by Wilson, not by a “wife.” This makes his elicitation self serving. The words are rampant with sexism. The assurance that “he is just another very sick...person,” and the suggestion to “treat him...as though he had pneumonia,” are made in bad faith. They completely excuse the alcoholic’s own choices and they seek to deny the freedom of the wife in her choice of how to deal with an alcoholic husband. The declarative, “you should never get angry,” by its very existence implies that she has gotten angry and has no right to her anger. In addition, the idea that someone should be given a “free pass,” from his partner is sexist philosophy which suggests that the woman’s self-esteem means nothing and that her (justifiable) feelings of anger shouldn’t exist. All of her actions should be subservient to him. Again, in the context of the 1930s, this attitude was hardly surprising, but the fact that this text<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I am not attempting to be harsh with those who suffer from alcoholism, but to point out the bias of this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> The Fourth Edition, 2001.

is studied daily, without revision, is unacceptable. How are women and men supposed to authentically relate to this?

Wilson takes this sexism to a whole other level when he writes:

Our next thought is that you should never tell him what he must do about his drinking. If he gets the idea that you are a nag or a killjoy, your chance of accomplishing anything useful may be zero.

Then Wilson hits his point home:

He will tell you he is misunderstood. This may lead to lonely evenings for you. He may seek someone else to console him—not always another man (111).

The message? If an alcoholic husband cheats on his wife with another woman, it is really *her* fault because she was a “nag,” a “killjoy,” and “misunderstood” her husband. Perhaps it’s true that he is misunderstood, but to lay the responsibility and blame on her is in an exhibition of bad faith. At this point, it is as if his alcoholism gives him permission to do whatever he wishes, possibly at his wife’s expense.

It is not that A.A. doesn’t counsel “the wives” to try to help their husbands with their alcoholism. This chapter strongly suggests that wives show the husbands the *Big Book*, for example, and that the husband try helping another drinker. The chapter also encourages women to “lock up” dangerous husbands. Eventually, there also comes a point when A.A. suggests that a woman leave her husband:

We know women who have done it. If such a woman adopt a spiritual way of life their road will be smoother (114).

Since A.A. says that everyone needs help from God, it is not surprising that it would suggest that women need spiritual help, but the idea that “the wives” know women who have “done it,” is patronizing and since Wilson wrote it, is also sexist. Again, today’s women and men are asked to read this literature, change the gender as needed,



and try to infer the real underlying message. But what is this real message? One interpretation of the message is that an alcoholic is ill and so should be free to do whatever he wants without any conflict from the family. Such a message is not just made in bad faith, it actually promotes it by apparently excusing the alcoholic for bad behavior while demanding understanding and acceptance from his family.

Women are further encouraged to “quietly” let their friends know that their husband is a “sick person” (115). The book suggests they not “take sides” in arguments with the children that occur due to his drinking (unless they need protecting). Wilson writes:

We wives found that, like everybody else, we were afflicted with pride, self-pity, vanity and all the things which go to make up the self-centered person; and we were not above selfishness or dishonesty. As our husbands began to apply spiritual principles in their lives, we began to see the desirability of doing so too (116).

After recommending that the wives behave in a manner that could be described as saintly, they are then scolded about their numerous faults; and it is not “the wives,” detailing these flaws, but Wilson. A woman is given two conflicting options: She can choose to be a saint although, no matter what, she is still a sinner. Her husband, though sick, is a sinner, too, but she must come down to his level from the pedestal that A.A. requires her to climb, and find God. A.A. assumes that she has not found Him/Her/It yet:

At first, some of us did not believe that we needed this help. We thought, on the whole, we were pretty good women, capable of being nicer if our husbands stopped drinking. But it was a silly idea that we were too good to need God (116).

Wilson is saying that men need to help women find a spiritual program and that a woman should, “Go along with [her] husband if [she] possibly can” (117). In contrast, the alcoholic husband is not expected to “go along” with his wife should she express anger

about his drinking, and her “nagging” can be blamed when he slips out to see another woman. But once he finds God, it is time for the wife to (again) “go along.” This is sexist because it shows that without a man and a masculine God, women are completely incapable of making a decent life for themselves. Thinking that “we were pretty good...capable of being nicer” is an insulting way of saying that while the husband was drinking, the wife wasn’t so hot, and now that he’s sober, she still isn’t. This is an attempt to crush a woman’s authentic choices while keeping the male in the more powerful position. A.A. is sexist because while it asks a person to surrender to a higher power (God), it informs the woman that her higher power is not only God but her husband. The A.A. couple surrenders to the higher power of God, and the A.A. wife surrenders to her husband, both when he is actively drinking and when he is not.

When the husband was drinking, the A.A. wife was told not to get angry or nag, lest she encourage him to cheat on her. Now that the husband is recovering in A.A., she is told that she shouldn’t “become jealous” of the attention he pays to other alcoholics:

The fact is that he should work with other people to maintain his own sobriety. Sometimes he will be so interested that he becomes really neglectful. Your house is filled with strangers. You may not like some of them...It will do little good if you point that out and urge more attention for yourself...You should join in his efforts as much as you possibly can. We suggest that you direct some of your thought to the wives of his new alcoholic friends. They need the counsel and love of a woman who has gone through what you have...If you cooperate, rather than complain, you will find that his enthusiasm will tone down (119).

The “wife” is asked, essentially, to give up her life to her husband. Her interests do not go before his, nor does her place of priority when it comes to him. This may in fact be the way it needs to be with a recovering alcoholic, but to ask that the partner give up her own life to “join in his efforts,” is biased toward the life of the alcoholic, no matter what

the gender. Either way, the partner loses. In this case, the partner is decidedly female for it is highly doubtful that a man would have been expected to be subservient to a woman, “to cooperate rather than complain,” when this book was written, perhaps even now.

Finally, it seems that the husband’s sobriety is dependent on his wife. Wilson explains:

The slightest fear or intolerance may lessen your husband’s chances of recovery. In a weak moment he may take your dislike of one of his high-stepping friends as one of those insanely trivial excuses to drink (120).

Again, the wife is made responsible for the husband’s recovery. She must go along to get along, or else he might get drunk. But A.A. creates another double bind, this time for the alcoholic’s wife. Since it is her responsibility to keep her husband sober, it’s a reverse message as Wilson writes:

We never, never try to arrange a man’s life so as to shield him from Temptation...Make him feel absolutely free to come and go as he likes... If he gets drunk, don’t blame yourself. God has either removed your husband’s liquor problem or He has not (120).

A double bind is created because the wife has been told that she must go along with his newfound alcoholic friends or he might drink. At the same time, she is told that she must allow her husband to come and go as he pleases and if he gets drunk, she is not to blame herself. So, on the one hand, A.A. says “Don’t do A or B might happen,” and on the other, A.A. says, “You must do A and B might happen.” The wife is “damned if she does and damned if she doesn’t.” How is she expected to make any kind of authentic choice for freedom in such a dilemma?

A.A. pushes the wife to behave in certain ways or her husband will drink, and in this last passage, tells her that if he drinks, she is not to “blame” herself. How can she reconcile the mixed messages that indicate her responsibility for her husband’s sobriety?

I do not mean to suggest that a woman who finds herself in such circumstances must remain a victim. However, she is presented with this situation and must choose. If she chooses to follow A.A.'s suggestions, she may find herself living an inauthentic life because she is choosing between two incompatible forms of determinism. This is so because it lays the responsibility of sobriety outside of the alcoholic. It does this by insisting that a wife may drive her husband to drink with her behavior. The wife herself is caught up in a deterministic view if she believes that she should go along with A.A. only because it tells her to. She has denied her freedom, and her choice is inauthentic. Sartre might say that she is living in bad faith because she is choosing what has been determined for her. If that is true, she is deceiving herself because she denies her own freedom, her own responsibility for herself.

The *Big Book's* chapter, "To Wives," is sexist in the extreme. It asks that a woman give up her life to keep her husband sober. The language that carries this message is itself inauthentic because its author, Bill Wilson, chose not just to keep his identity a secret, but to pose as a collective of women. The unique struggles of women in alcoholic relationships are thus negated in the text. They exist only through the eyes of the male alcoholic. A.A. insists that its female members engage in an out of body experience by regularly reading this chapter not just because they are asked read it as if were written "To Husbands," but because it asks them to ignore and thereby implicitly accept its sexist attitudes and masculinist language. Women are expected to relate to a story that is inauthentic not only in its purported authorship, but by what it asks women to do. How can a woman who believes she is the equal of men participate in an organization steeped in such sexist language and ideas? For the alcoholic woman to recover in A.A., she must

choose to ignore its outdated language, and by extension, close her eyes to the implication that the ongoing use of the text is deemed not only adequate, but preferred. Perhaps this was acceptable in 1939, but it certainly is unacceptable now. The unwillingness of A.A. to revise the basic text puts the alcoholic woman in the predicament of choosing to follow a sexist system of thought rendered in antiquated language, or finding another way to “get sober.” In a society where there are few accepted (and affordable) recovery options for alcoholics other than A.A., this is a major problem. The question that must then be asked: Can a woman accept the language of A.A. and still maintain her authenticity as a female?

### **A.A. and Gender: Further Language Problems**

A.A. was created by men, and in its beginnings, for men. In the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a view that “nice” women didn’t drink. As society developed, this perception began to change. Many women now participate in A.A., but due to the anonymous nature of the meetings, it is difficult to say just how many women members there are. Since A.A. is still the primary treatment for American alcoholics, women who wish to recover from alcoholism will probably find themselves, at some point, attending an A.A. meeting. Because of A.A.’s patriarchal history and the masculinist nature of its literature, women are confronted with unique problems regarding authentic choice. If, as Tallen says, A.A. is “founded on exclusionary principles” (401), how is a woman expected to carve out an authentic identity for herself as an A.A. member? There are a number of problems, as I have shown in looking at the chapter, “To Wives,” that women in A.A. must grapple with. Indeed, when a woman becomes an A.A. member, she learns

that in reading the primary literature of the program she must apply what was written for men to herself. A.A.'s *Big Book* is filled with rules to live by, first and foremost with its twelve steps. It is helpful to examine some of these steps to understand the dilemma they create for women.

The twelve steps seek to break down the ego of the self-centered male Wilson was targeting in the *Big Book*. The first step asks that the drinker admit that he is “powerless over alcohol.” Through listing “defects of character,” in the sixth step, and “humbly” asking God to remove “shortcomings,” in the seventh step, the ego undergoes a sort of stripping process. First, the alcoholic admits his powerlessness, and then examines his “character defects.” It is a process of unrelenting self-criticism (and perhaps the criticism of his sponsor). When they are not focusing on God, the steps hone in on what is wrong with a person. For a man living in a male-dominated culture, ego deflation may be the appropriate way to go, but for many women, this tearing down is destructive. In Jerslid's book on women and alcoholism, *Happy Hours*, she writes:

...many people—especially women and minorities—come to A.A. in a frame of mind quite different from the successful, grandiose, white middle-class man who was Bill Wilson's archetypal alcoholic (298).

Jerslid goes on to explain that many women have suffered from “exploitation and abuse” and thus are used to “berating and attacking” themselves (299). Focusing on their “character defects,” and having their egos deflated is not what many women need. The language of A.A. is aggressive in this way—it is masculinist. Behind it lays the idea of “fixing,” the alcoholic but this in itself is a masculinist approach. In *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen points out that men generally see themselves as “problem solvers,”

and such “fixing,” of emotional problems is seldom helpful to women who feel no sense of mutual understanding with such an approach. (52-53). There is very little understanding shown in the twelve steps as the steps are filled with directives to surrender to God and performance utterances to live life by A.A.’s philosophy. For example, the second step states that alcoholics, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” (59). This step does not offer the alcoholic the option of “trying” to believe, or even “worked” to believe but the alcoholic is instead told that this *is* what she will do and as a result of uttering the step, it is therefore done. This is not unlike what happens when a private in the army answers his sergeant with a salute and “Yes, sir!” By replying, “Yes, sir,” the private not only agrees to the order but begins to perform it. Nowhere is there leeway for human error or individual action. Such utterances have a commanding effect. But women generally are considered aggressive when they command because commanding has been considered to be a male way of speaking and behaving. Think of the mother who tells her child, “Wait until your father gets home.” What is implied is that her father will issue more of a directive—a command—than the mother is able to do. A.A.’s steps, designed by men, reflect this masculine, aggressive approach (and I should add, the steps are not unlike the Ten Commandments in how they are designed).

In the texts of the *Big Book* and the *12 and 12*, when A.A. claims to be making only “suggestions,” it is hard to take them as such because the tone of the prose is so aggressive. And A.A.’s masculinist aggression is found not only in its “suggested,” twelve steps, but in its descriptions of an alcoholic. For example, in the chapter, “Step Two,” in the *12 and 12*, the alcoholic is described as “the belligerent one. He is in a state

of mind which can be described only as savage” (25). Women are not usually described as “savage.” How is a woman supposed to authentically relate to such descriptions? Certainly women are not always “soft” and aggressive behavior is not the sole purview of the male. However, as Tannen notes, men often engage in “friendly aggression,” which women may misinterpret for hostile confrontation (150). The language of the *Big Book* and the *12 and 12*, more often than not, resembles harsh confrontation rather than “friendly aggression.”

Aggressiveness has a masculinist factor that often alienates people; this can be especially true of women who have generally been taught to act in a more nurturing way. Women are, as Tannen points out, “more inclined to be givers of praise” (69) which is highly unusual in the language of A.A. For example, the emphasis on a person’s “character defects,” plays a major role in how recovering alcoholics in A.A. are asked to relate to themselves. Instead of focusing on the positives of their character, and reinforcing those, they are directed to ask God to remove their “defects of character,” and “shortcomings.” They are also told to take “personal inventory” and “promptly” admit it when they are “wrong.” Obviously admitting wrongdoing is a good idea, but it is the constant focus on what is wrong with a person in A.A. that creates a masculinist, even militaristic environment. In examining the admission of wrongdoing from a feminist viewpoint, this environment is not “female friendly” since it primarily concentrates on what is wrong with a woman instead of what is right. Women have been told for years what is wrong with them by a male-dominated culture. Part of feminism is the idea that women take pride in who they are and lift themselves up out of their self-defeating self-criticism. A.A.’s approach runs counter to feminism in this way.



Constantly finding fault with oneself leads to a lack of trust in oneself, which is fostered in A.A. by the idea that “self sufficiency” is not a good thing:

The philosophy of self-sufficiency is not paying off...it is a bone-crushing juggernaut whose final achievement is ruin (12 and 12, 37).

A.A. says that only belief in God and dependence on the A.A. group will “save” the alcoholic—not self-sufficiency. What sort of message is this for women who have struggled to become self-sufficient in a culture that has a history of forcing them to depend on men? The message against self-sufficiency in A.A. completely ignores the history of women. It is a message that again, was designed for successful businessmen, like Wilson, with overly inflated egos who “thought they had the world by the tail” (Jerslid 299).

Each time a woman reads the literature of A.A., she must look past the masculine pronouns and sexist messages and apply A.A.’s philosophy to herself. The meetings of A.A. further reinforce a sexist nature as the testimony given is in the style of Protestant ministry and “holds” the floor. For example, when people tell their stories at A.A., “cross-talk,” is not allowed. This means that the speaker talks as long as he wishes without interruption. It also means that when another member takes his turn to speak, he must not directly comment on the previous speaker’s testimony. Though this rule is broken all the time, the idea behind it not only allows the speaker to hold the floor and dominate the meeting, but prevents supportive feedback. However, the “sharing” of testimony at the meetings can be read as feminine since it allows the “taking of turns,” which is something many women learned from their mothers. In addition, an A.A. member’s sponsoring of another member can be viewed as a female idea as it promotes

intimacy. But A.A. remains masculinist and sexist because it is based on the masculine ideas that are behind its language and that are reflected in the language itself.

When a woman in A.A. is encouraged to look beyond the language, she is in effect asked to place herself in the male role. However, this move is disingenuous in that it assumes the masculinist and sexist language is neutral. In addition, “pretending that women and men are the same hurts women, because the ways they are treated are based on the norm for men” (Tannen 16). A.A. doesn’t generalize about alcoholics in its literature; its language is geared specifically toward men. Men are the “first” sex, women are the “second.” When women are specifically discussed, they are referred to as “Our women folk,” and “housewives.” For a woman to agree to such language, she is agreeing to allow sexist ideas to stand. Thus, if a woman chooses the “A.A. way,” she is agreeing to participate in an organization that is patriarchal and sexist. But in so choosing, is she really choosing inauthentically against herself, against her history? This is an especially tricky question.

### **Authenticity and the Woman in A.A.**

It is vital to remember that A.A. asks an alcoholic to choose to surrender to God. As I discussed in Chapter 3, in the Kierkegaardian view, if a person chooses faith in God because she has come, out of her own subjective experiences, to believe that spiritual transcendence is the way she truly wants to live, her choice may be authentic. The choice is not authentic, however, if she makes it only because A.A. tells her to, and not based on her own subjective experience. Yet if the alcoholic chooses to stay an active alcoholic, she remains in a form of despair because she is not increasing her conscious awareness. This “self” that she chooses if she continues to drink is finite, denying possibility which

denies God. For Kierkegaard, the more conscious one is, the greater the chance that she will “pierce through every negativity” and find salvation in God (177). Looking at this philosophy, it would seem that the choice for God in A.A. is authentic. Again, this is true only if the alcoholic makes the choice out of her own experience, not because she is told to do so. If she makes the choice in this way, she honors her individuality because she has come to it out of her own experience in life. The question then becomes, how does a woman make an authentic choice in A.A. if she makes it based on the experience of living in a male-dominated society? In making the choice to believe in God based on the rules of A.A., she negates her history because she denies her identity as a woman. This is because A.A.’s rules were written with men in mind. They do not show any understanding of gender oppression, and throughout its texts the A.A. language reveals a sexist system of thought.

Yet Kierkegaard believed that history is “objective,” because it is something taught, not lived through individual experience. In this way, history would “attempt to generalize, predict or explain the behavior of human groups or individuals according to scientific laws” (Warnock 8). In this light, the woman who makes the choice to accept what A.A. teaches her, is on the one hand acting inauthentically because she is doing what others tell her to. But on the other hand, it would be an authentic choice because it’s not based on history, or in this case, the collective history of women. This problem presents itself to women (and to minorities) in A.A. in a way it doesn’t to men because A.A. is based on white male viewpoints. A woman who no longer wishes herself to be described by the history of collective female oppression may make an authentic choice for A.A. but she still chooses the sexist society of A.A. How can this be an authentic

choice? True, if she chooses God based on subjective experience she is making a choice authentically, but A.A. tells the alcoholic woman that she can only remain sober within A.A. This creates a further splitting of the self as a woman alcoholic must deny her subjective experience as a woman in order to accept A.A.'s teachings.

It could be that a woman who chooses in favor of A.A. is denying her own gender. Looking at this from a feminist viewpoint, this is clearly so because she is choosing to agree to a sexist philosophy and system. But using the Kierkegaardian model, it may well be that in taking the "leap of faith," the woman steps into a spiritual realm which frees her from her past, into possibility, thus to God. Her gender at this point may not matter.

But the splitting of the self for a woman in A.A. creates what Sartre would call "anguish" (30-31). In believing the A.A. principles, an aware woman realizes that she is agreeing to overlook sexist ideas but live by them anyway. She thus agrees to the A.A. way of surrendering to God even though she sees A.A.'s sexism. This is so because by the act of *overlooking* the sexism, she admits to herself that it exists. This puts her in the position of denying her own experiences, and the idea of her living as a free and independent woman. In this way, she holds two contradictory viewpoints, or as Warnock states in her discussion of Sartre, "...to believe and not believe the same thing at the same time" (100). Her alcoholism has forced her to think about what she values more—an aware consciousness, or a state that denies her awareness, in this case alcoholism. This is so because once aware, she cannot be unaware, and that is what her alcoholism attempts to make her. It is a situation, in fact, of cognitive dissonance As Festinger showed, this is a state where a person finds herself trying to avoid inconsistencies of thought

(qtd. in Plous 22-23). The anguish of being free, of making a free choice, results. For Kierkegaard, this rising awareness, which is despair, may bring her to a point where she “pierces” through and makes a leap of faith.

But the “smoke and mirrors,” aspect of A.A. for women—the deception in the chapter, “To Wives,” and its focus on male alcoholics and sexist ideas—makes any choice they make in A.A. riddled with perverse contortions. A woman must engage in all sorts of game-playing to see the A.A. philosophy as one that she, as a woman, can accept. Self-deception is inevitable because her gender has been central to her experiences and A.A.’s text and ideas remain masculinist. The only hope she has of authenticity is Kierkegaard’s leap of faith toward God as a result of her own genuine beliefs which spring from her subjective experience. At this point, God becomes bigger than A.A. Yet in A.A., an alcoholic finds the organization to be bigger than God. This is because of the strong suggestion that A.A. is the only way to keep sober. The woman—or man—who disagrees with this may choose eventually to leave the A.A. group and explore a relationship with God elsewhere. The idea that one cannot retain sobriety outside of A.A. is a myth and is cruel because it conveys a message of hopelessness toward alcoholics of any gender. I will discuss this, alternatives to A.A., and suggestions for A.A.’s improvement in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER FIVE: OPTIONS, METAPHORS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

The person who finds herself identified as an alcoholic will almost certainly, at some point, be directed to Alcoholics Anonymous. Without question, A.A. has become American society's "cure" for the alcoholic. Why is this? Perhaps it has to do with the incestuous nature of drug and alcohol counseling; many alcoholics and addicts go on to become counselors to those similarly afflicted (Fingarette 23). If they have found success through the Twelve Steps of A.A., they will pass on the A.A. method to other alcoholics. Indeed, A.A.'s 12<sup>th</sup> step is the basis for this missionary zeal:

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs (Twelve and Twelve 106).

The recovering alcoholic in A.A. is admonished to "be at the place where you may be of maximum helpfulness to others, so never hesitate to go anywhere if you can be helpful" (A.A., 2001:102). Helping other alcoholics becomes the mission not just of A.A. the organization, but of each A.A. member. The "word" spreads and the A.A. philosophy becomes pervasive in society.

For a person suffering from alcoholism, A.A.'s message that an alcoholic "must find a spiritual basis of life—or else" (A.A., 2001: 44), is impossible to ignore. A.A. exploits this idea in the *Big Book* when it states that when helping an alcoholic, "the more hopeless he feels the better. He will be more likely to follow your suggestions" (94). Repeatedly, A.A. drives home the point that only a spiritual solution found within A.A.'s twelve steps will help an alcoholic recover from his "illness." The idea that someone or something outside of A.A. could offer a "cure" that is just as effective for living a sober

life is unthinkable. For A.A., nothing else has worked for the alcoholic but A.A., and nothing else will. This “do or die,” philosophy is stunning in its hopelessness: There is only one right way and if you do not follow, you will fail. This is not unlike the message that some have heard in church—believe in God or suffer in hell for eternity. It is black or white; there is no in-between. This message is inauthentic because it denies freedom to the sufferer; A.A. is placed into an all-powerful role. The alcoholic ultimately learns that it is not just to God to whom he must surrender, but to A.A. The implication is that one can only find recovery from God with A.A. as God’s mediator. The alcoholic must seek God through A.A. In this way, A.A. sets itself up as more powerful than God. As a result, the recovering alcoholic in A.A. learns that A.A. is indispensable. If the member questions A.A., he is usually told that he is being “willful,” and that one shouldn’t question or “intellectualize,” the A.A. message. For example, if a female member remarks that she thinks A.A.’s literature is sexist, she will most likely be told that she must look at the “overall,” message and that to question A.A.’s authority is a matter of her placing her will over the A.A. group. This is a typical “ad hominem” response. Instead of answering the argument directly, that A.A.’s language is or isn’t sexist and why it has not been updated, the woman is faulted for being “willful.” Such dodges are common in A.A. and are unacceptable. If A.A. truly wants to reach out to alcoholics and act inclusively, it serves no one by alienating its current and future members—and all those who leave its rooms and don’t return.<sup>12</sup>

A.A. alienates with its sexist, non-Christian, and anti-atheist messages, as I have discussed in the previous chapters. Its refusal to update the main text of the *Big Book* and

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<sup>12</sup> Membership in A.A. is difficult to track because it does not keep records of its current or past members; people are free to come and go.

the *12 and 12* is hypocritical because of its own insistence on spiritual awakenings and positive change in the recovering alcoholic. A.A. itself does not reflect society's awareness of and movement away from sexist language and behaviors, nor its efforts to correct their impact. If the organization leaves the language intact as a historical document, it reveals its own folly since groups and individuals in A.A. study these books on a daily basis. A.A. is not a holy text, but its members treat it as such when they resist changing it. One may argue that A.A. has acknowledged societal changes by offering women's and gay meeting groups, but these changes are ultimately only superficial because A.A.'s texts—the language of A.A.—are predominately biased against atheism, non-Christians and women (not to mention gay men and women). A.A. perpetuates masculinist and religious philosophies despite its claims of inclusiveness. A.A. maintains it is not a religious organization, yet its roots and practices provide ample evidence to the contrary. An organization that uses language—the signifier of “I am an alcoholic,” for example—to define itself and its members, yet seemingly refuses to look at the implications of its texts is acting irresponsibly and inauthentically. The organization was founded by men using masculinist ways of thinking and communicating, thus it does not relate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century female alcoholic. Masculinist ways of knowing and relating are recycled in A.A. meetings every day.

A.A.'s claim that it is a growing entity, with meetings held in 150 countries (AA.,2001: xxiii), must be kept in perspective. In contrast to A.A.'s two million members, there are approximately 18 million alcoholics in the United States. One wonders just how successful A.A.'s message is when comparing these figures. Of course, many alcoholics may be refusing to acknowledge their alcoholism. But the question the



greater community seems to ignore is whether its reliance on A.A. is fair and just. The popular belief that if one is alcoholic, one should go to A.A., seems inauthentic itself because it reflects an unwillingness to examine the true nature and identity of this organization.

There are, in fact, other options for alcoholics who want organizational help. Two such groups that are receiving some recognition are Smart Recovery and Women for Sobriety.

Smart Recovery was founded on the ideas of psychologist Albert Ellis and takes its philosophy from the area of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which views addiction as “a complex maladaptive behavior with possible physiological factors” (Smart Recovery). The program is not religiously based nor does it engage in labeling of people as alcoholics or addicts. The group emphasizes re-learning negative behaviors through:

- Enhancing motivation;
- Refusing to act on urges to use;
- Managing life’s problems in a sensible and effective way without substances;
- Developing a positive and balanced, healthy lifestyle (Smart Recovery).

Like A.A., Smart Recovery espouses abstinence from alcohol. The program does not discourage its members from participating in A.A., but instead offers an alternative to the twelve step program. Smart Recovery claims its offers more than 300 meetings worldwide, and also has on-line meetings available (<http://www.smartrecovery.org/>).

Women for Sobriety is “the first national self-help program for women alcoholics” (Women for Sobriety). Founded in 1976 by the late Jeanne Kirkpatrick, herself an

alcoholic, its “New Life Program,” is comprised of thirteen “acceptance statements,” that are intended to help women who seek a positive and sober life. The steps are geared toward boosting a woman’s self esteem and possess the flavor of positive affirmations:

1. I have a life-threatening problem that once had me.

*I now take charge of my life. I accept the responsibility.*

2. Negative thoughts destroy only myself.

*My first conscious act must be to remove negativity from my life.*

3. Happiness is a habit I will develop.

*Happiness is created, not waited for.*

4. Problems bother me only to the degree I permit them to.

*I now better understand my problems and do not permit problems to overwhelm me.*

5. I am what I think.

*I am a capable, competent, caring, compassionate woman.*

6. Life can be ordinary or it can be great.

*Greatness is mine by a conscious effort.*

7. Love can change the course of my world.

*Caring becomes all important.*

8. The fundamental object of life is emotional and spiritual growth.

*Daily I put my life into a proper order, knowing which are the priorities.*

9. The past is gone forever.

*No longer will I be victimized by the past, I am a new person.*

10. All love given returns.

*I will learn to know that others love me.*

11. Enthusiasm is my daily exercise.

*I treasure all moments of my new life.*

12. I am a competent woman and have much to give life.

*This is what I am and I shall know it always*

13. I am responsible for myself and for my actions.

*I am in charge of my mind, my thoughts, and my life* (WFS 15).

The thirteen steps place responsibility for a sober life with the woman; powerlessness is not one of its foundations for recovery. Women for Sobriety appears to be becoming more visible (Jerslid 300) and may offer a more self-affirming alternative to women who are alienated by A.A.'s focus on "character defects."

But the ways that alcoholics stay sober through such recovery outlets—if they stay sober—or even by stopping drinking on their own, Denzin says "are not well understood" (xxix). Over the past several decades, research on alcoholism has been growing, yet the societal solution for alcoholism remains constant: "Go to A.A." It is not my intention to discount the success that A.A. continues to have with a number of alcoholics, but to criticize the inauthentic ways that A.A. goes about its recovery message by misrepresenting its religiosity and remaining sexist in its language. Its membership, in contrast with current alcoholism statistics, suggests that the notion that "A.A. is the only way" to recovery is false. It is a falsity which society has appeared to accept, and unfortunately it may reflect an attitude that would just prefer not to deal more deeply with the problem of alcoholism and addiction. As Tallen has pointed out, social criticism of A.A. and the twelve step movement is noticeable for its absence (407).

There may be another explanation for the existence of the number of alcoholics in the United States. Perhaps society needs a different way of looking at alcoholism. Surely, dependence on alcohol is a real problem. But there may be substantial differences from those who drink heavily because they enjoy alcoholic beverages and those who drink because they feel “driven” to do so. Society has a rather split view of alcohol. For a drug that is the target of A.A. and the recovery industry, it is widely available. There is a dualism to this co-existence that is hard to ignore. On the one hand, drinking is a popular promotion of advertising messages; bars are ubiquitous; and the media, such as the film industry, often glamorize drinking. On the other hand, A.A. boasts that it is two million members strong (A.A., 2001: xxiii), and the overall recovery movement has made billions of dollars treating those who suffer from alcoholism and other addictions (Fingarette 23).<sup>13</sup> At best, this “split,” message is inauthentic in its circularity. It is like Sartre’s notion of holding contradictory viewpoints—believing and not believing at the same time. In this case, the split implies the idea that alcoholism is a serious problem but also that drinking should be a part of everyday life.

Counter arguments to the A.A. belief that alcoholism is a disease have not been welcome. Alan Marlatt, a professor of psychology and director of the University of Washington’s “Addictive Behavior’s Research Center,” said that when researchers tried to investigate moderation as an alternative to abstinence of alcohol, they were “accused of murder. [We were told] that we’re all in denial. That we’re enablers” (Shute and Tangle 1997). This is another example of an *ad hominem*, one that, instead of dealing

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<sup>13</sup> A.A. itself is a not-for-profit organization.

directly with the idea that moderate drinking might be a viable alternative for some alcoholics, attacks the researchers instead.

There is an anti-intellectual, anti-science bent in A.A. that is disturbing. Yet as I pointed out in Chapter One, studies exist that show alcoholism to be genetically and environmentally based. If this is the case, A.A.'s idea that alcoholism is a "spiritual disease," is rather absurd. It almost seems a medieval way of approaching a condition that ultimately, it only understands by "faith healing." Eventually, science may render the inauthentic idea that, "only God," can save the alcoholic, obsolete.

### **The Objectivity of A.A.**

If it is true, that the active alcoholic becomes a "slave" to drinking and alcohol becomes the center of her life, then alcohol has become bigger than the drinker. This is in keeping with A.A.'s first step, that the alcoholic is "powerless over alcohol." In service to alcohol, the alcoholic may spend a large part of her time not only drinking, but thinking about and searching out alcohol. Indeed, these activities may occupy more of her time than the actual act of drinking. Alcohol is her "God." In A.A., the group substitutes alcohol with God and directs the alcoholic to live by principles that have God at their center. As a result, God is bigger than the alcoholic. In Kierkegaardian thought, if the alcoholic is to make a leap of faith toward God, it must be genuine, not because of external factors.

For Kierkegaard, it is likely that A.A. would be viewed in terms of "objectivity." Objectivity contains rules that dictate what a person will think and do; A.A.'s twelve

steps are rules for the alcoholic to live by—they not only suggest ways to live, but by speaking the steps, the alcoholic has begun the A.A. journey because the steps are performative. For example, when the A.A. group admits to being “powerless over alcohol,” the action is in the admission. This would be a form of adhering to objectivity because in uttering the steps, one is performing, thus *doing* the steps. One is not just “playing by the rules,” one is acting out the rules. In addition, when members of the group give testimony about their drinking at A.A. meetings, this would be another form of objectivity because the members are relating history. While this shared history is supposed to help alcoholics recover from alcoholism—alcoholics helping each other recover—it is an inauthentic way for an alcoholic to recover because the history is not experienced by the listening member of the group, but by the member speaking. The member describing his alcoholic past may indeed have come to join A.A. authentically because of his subjective experience, but the listener, perhaps an active alcoholic, does not subjectively share in the speaker’s experiences. Thus, this is another example of inauthenticity because A.A. shows that not only does an alcoholic recover by living by rules, but because also by objective “sharing” of experience. This is so because, to Kierkegaard, authentic choice comes only by the subjective or lived experience of the individual, not the group or the other. As Warnock points out:

Sociology and psychology would be totally objective studies, and therefore unacceptable in principle, because they attempt to generalize, predict or explain the behavior of human groups or individuals according to scientific law (8).

Because A.A. accepts, in Kierkegaardian terms, “rules governing both behavior and thought” (Warnock 8), it therefore is located in objectivity. Just as organized religion

does not offer the individual an authentic choice in this way, neither does A.A. The choice for A.A. is made all the more hazy because A.A. does not present itself as religious even though it is. But the most important element in Kierkegaardian philosophy regarding objectivity and subjectivity is that only subjective experience values the *individual* over the governing rules. In this case, because subjectivity is the experience of the individual, A.A. is inauthentic because it denies individuality by its “one size fits all” philosophy that each A.A. member must adhere to *as part of* the A.A. group. The A.A. group is also inauthentic because it is made up of members who depend on each other’s experiences in order to heal themselves. The A.A. group lives by rules and attempts to transform the other members by these rules. By listening to the testimony of the others in the group, A.A. members are rendered observers of the alcoholic experience, but the only way for the alcoholic to authentically choose A.A. and/or God is from his own subjective experience.

I am not suggesting that an alcoholic sharing her experiences with other alcoholics is not helpful. Indeed, quite the contrary; it is heartening to know that one is not alone in her suffering. But the alcoholic who chooses A.A. based only on listening to the testimony of other alcoholics and on obeying or “working” the twelve steps is not making an authentic choice. Whether in or out of A.A., for the alcoholic to make an authentic choice, she must do so based on her individual, lived experiences.

## Alcoholism as Metaphor

We tend to see alcoholism as a reflection of a selfish person who doesn't have control over himself, who is sloppy, and who seems not to care about others in his reality. He is, as A.A. puts it, "self-centered in the extreme," his life tipped out of balance by continuous alcohol intake. But it's important to examine a way that an alcoholic might drink in an effort to achieve authenticity. To understand this, it is helpful to look at the use of metaphor in an alcoholic's life.

Denzin has written that an effect of alcoholism is that the alcoholic thinks in metaphoric terms (95). Denzin uses the following statement, made by an alcoholic, as an example: "I'm crazy, like a horse who wants to jump over a house. I'm out of the saddle, flying high over houses" (95). The alcoholic here describes himself as being in such a state of anxiety (or inebriation) that he feels no limits, even though he knows that, like a horse, he is a creature that clearly cannot "jump over houses." The alcoholic may also be using the horse metaphor to describe his own skittishness and restlessness. Denzin argues that when an alcoholic speaks metaphorically, he reflects a confused way of thinking. Indeed, speaking in metaphors may inspire fear in others who believe that such language is reflective only of emotion and illusion, lacking reason (Lakoff and Johnson 189). But is this metaphoric language necessarily a negative symptom of lack of control or "disease," or more a genuine way for the alcoholic to communicate his inner-life?

Metaphorical language is a means of describing a metaphysical way of experiencing life. When relating to the world in a metaphorical way, objects become *other* than what they are, or exaggerated versions of themselves. Metaphors relate themselves to other



things and become similar to them. For example, a child's scream may sound "like the whistle on a steam engine train;" or a creaky, rusty gate may make "the sound of fingernails scraping against a blackboard." Metaphorical description is the stuff of poetry, and is a reflection of the poet's relationship to, or way of seeing, the world. One could say that the poet uses metaphoric language as a way of transcending the world through his subjective experience of it. The alcoholic's use of metaphor, like the poet's, may in fact be a reflection of the alcoholic's desire to transcend his immediate world. It may be transcendence that the alcoholic has been seeking all along, not necessarily the obliteration of his senses. For example, links between creativity and alcoholism have been long debated (Ludwig 953), although complete inebriation usually sullies creative output. But the idea that creative people such as artists, writers and musicians use alcohol to engage their creative "muse," reflects a search for transcendence because they are trying to connect with something inside themselves that is outside of the ordinary or immediate world. In addition, in her studies on the link between the artistic temperament and bi-polar disorder, Jamison points out that there have been numerous studies linking alcohol use with artists who suffered from manic depressive illness (37). Perhaps these artists were also hoping to *transcend* the effects of their mental illness. Or understand it—according to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is "one of the most basic mechanisms we have for understanding our experience" (211).

The notion of alcoholism as a disease, at this point, is seen from another angle. It could be that the alcoholic seeks to transcend the ordinary or immediate world by drinking. Or perhaps it is the alcoholic's way to attempt some sort of re-connection with something in himself that has been lost. In either case then, alcoholism would not so

much be a disease but a search for something outside—or inside—oneself. This could be an authentic search since it is one that seeks freedom from the constrictions of temporal reality, perhaps towards God. However, in this case, A.A. may have it right—if the alcoholic drinks in a search of transcendence, she in fact may be suffering from a form of spiritual emptiness. It may be that the alcoholic has been searching for “God,” all along, but short-circuiting her search by using alcohol. If a search for transcendence is toward a spiritual way of living, A.A. could be seen as offering an authentic life to the alcoholic because it offers a way for a person to break free of her worldly circumstances. Still, it remains true that if a choice toward transcendence is to be authentic, it must be derived from subjective, lived experiences.

### **God is Bigger than A.A.**

The alcoholic who has chosen to live according to A.A.’s steps and surrender to God may at some point wish to leave the A.A. group while continuing to live a sober life. But the idea that the alcoholic can do this is contrary to A.A.’s philosophy because A.A. so closely aligns itself with God. A.A.’s contention that only an alcoholic can help another alcoholic stay sober makes sense in terms of a person remaining within the confines of the A.A. program because alcoholics form the A.A. group. But A.A. strongly suggests that spiritual help for the alcoholic may only be found in A.A. In the *Big Book*’s chapter, “There is a Solution,” A.A. states that acceptance of a spiritual life is the only way for the alcoholic to recover. But it also makes it clear that it is only A.A. that can provide this path to recovery, other paths to God are incidental:

We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals. This should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in light of past associations. Not all of us join religious bodies, but most of us favor such memberships (28).

A.A. relates a number of messages in this passage. First, it states that it doesn't care what religious organizations or "bodies" its members are affiliated with *as individuals*. The use of the noun "individual" makes it clear that the authentic self only exists outside of the A.A. group because inside the A.A. group, not only is a person not an "individual," he is first and foremost an A.A. member. Thus the individual might be Catholic or Jewish, but inside of A.A., it does not matter what his religious affiliation is because his individuality does not matter—it is in service to A.A. Secondly, this religious affiliation is a personal affair because it exists outside of A.A.—once the alcoholic is inside of A.A., his religious background does not matter because A.A. comes first. By extension, A.A. says it "favors[s]" religious "memberships," which would only seem logical due to A.A.'s Protestant roots and its continued strong religiosity.

But there is more going on here. By stating that "it [is] no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals," A.A. ultimately takes the place of the religious affiliation. A.A. becomes the religious or spiritual identification, or way of life, that an alcoholic needs when it comes to getting and staying sober. And A.A. goes on to point out that even the "convictions," of agnosticism are "no great obstacle to a spiritual experience" (28-29), which implies the spiritual experience that one finds within A.A., not outside of it (where an agnostic might well remain an agnostic), is the only way of recovering for the alcoholic.

At the end of the chapter, A.A. describes how, later in the *Big Book*, one will read testimony by 42 alcoholics who share their “personal experiences” (29) of how they found salvation and sobriety through A.A.<sup>14</sup>. A.A. concludes:

Our hope is that many alcoholic men and women, desperately in need, will see these pages, and we believe that it is only by fully disclosing ourselves and our problems that they will be persuaded to say, “Yes, I am one of them, too. I must have this thing” (29).

Acknowledging “this thing” is the A.A. way of life. It cannot be found outside of A.A., and only by joining A.A.’s ranks does one have access to the spiritual life that it describes throughout the *Big Book*, the *12 and 12*, and the Twelve Steps. In this way, A.A. becomes *bigger* than God because it implies that it is the only way for an alcoholic to get to God. This is a problem for the recovering alcoholic who wishes to move beyond A.A. at some point in her life. Since A.A. says there is no cure for alcoholism, one is always recovering. There is never a point in time where one can say, “I used to have alcoholism, but I don’t anymore.” In A.A. it is common to meet members who have been in the program multiples of years. Leaving the program is discouraged because the recovering alcoholic might drink once she is outside of the A.A. way of life. Following the steps on her own are not enough—she must go to A.A. groups and minister to other alcoholics. Once in A.A., it is implied that you should be there for life, otherwise your sobriety is at risk.

But if God is all-powerful, how is it that He would not be as powerful outside of A.A.? If surrendering to God and accepting a power “greater than oneself” is the answer to healing the alcoholic, why couldn’t such a God continue to do so if the recovering alcoholic leaves A.A.? Perhaps the alcoholic has found a religion that he believes will

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<sup>14</sup> These personal stories are found in Part II of the *Big Book*.

help him more completely. Perhaps he doesn't wish to identify himself as an alcoholic anymore because he sees himself as a person full of much more complexity than the label, "alcoholic" implies. Furthermore, there are certain facts to consider. In a 1996 study, Sobell and Sobell found that it is possible for an alcoholic to recover without treatment<sup>15</sup> (969). In addition, the researchers found that for some alcoholics, it is possible to drink moderately (970). These findings suggest that one might recover from the "disease," of alcoholism in ways that run counter to A.A.'s belief that an alcoholic can never drink again (A.A., 2001: xxx). But importantly, for my discussion here, they show that alcoholics can recover outside of A.A. Whether they do this through spiritual means or the support of friends and family is unclear in their study, but the findings of the research give hope to alcoholics that A.A. is not the *only* way to recover.

Furthermore, for A.A. or any organization to suggest that it is bigger or more powerful than God is inauthentic. In Kierkegaardian terms, this would imply that the rules and regulations of such an organization like A.A. take the place of God and are more powerful than God. This would have nothing to do with subjective experience because A.A. substitutes its twelve steps for God. Surrendering to the twelve steps of A.A.—the rules of A.A.—becomes a more powerful act than surrendering to God because of the suggestion that A.A. is bigger than God. If God were bigger, the twelve steps would be unnecessary. It might be argued that A.A. does not claim more power than God but rather co-exists with God for the alcoholic, but that is not completely true because the alcoholic must surrender to God *through* A.A. Although A.A. repeatedly talks of God's will throughout the *Big Book*, it is A.A.'s will that the group reflects each time it identifies itself, its members, as alcoholic. Notice that when the A.A. member

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<sup>15</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous was included in the forms of treatment.

announces himself at a meeting, he does not mention God, only his name and that he is an alcoholic. God is talked of in group discussion, but is secondary to the label of alcoholic. One could read that as “I am first an alcoholic. Then I am God’s child.” It is therefore not surprising if an alcoholic in A.A. comes to the conclusion that he cannot continue to recover outside its confines.

It follows then that in the A.A. view, God may not be all-powerful *outside* of A.A. Though A.A. says that it has “no monopoly on God” (A.A.,2001: 95), it suggests otherwise when it talks of recovery only through its path to God, i.e. the twelve steps. This suggests that outside of A.A., God does not have the power to help the alcoholic recover. Again, this is a way that A.A. makes itself bigger than God. What A.A. offers then with its emphasis on lifetime membership is not authentic choice because it denies the freedom to the alcoholic to believe and experience a God that is separate from A.A.—and that may indeed be more powerfully able to help the alcoholic recover from alcoholism. It also denies that each alcoholic is an individual. The individual who has made Kierkegaard’s leap of faith accepts God and by doing so, accepts possibility. When A.A. suggests that its members cannot leave without risking relapse, it denies the possibility, not only of individual experience, but of God. This is so because God holds all possibility and when there is God, it is always possible for an alcoholic to recover whether he is in A.A. or not (that is if God is truly all-powerful and omnipotent which has been debated for centuries).

How then does a recovering alcoholic make an authentic choice away from the A.A. program? If one has only experienced the A.A. way of things throughout one’s sobriety, it would seem that authentic choice would be difficult since that choice must be based on

subjective experience. However, if the experience of the alcoholic has led her to believe that she wants to seek God outside of A.A., it is authentic for her to do so because this requires another leap of faith based upon her experience. If she finds herself at a point of despair in A.A., having arrived at a higher level of consciousness through her sobriety, it makes sense that one day she would seek to leap toward the unknown—toward God—once again. Clearly, remaining in A.A. for life does work for some members, but *some* individuals may find that they would prefer to find God or sobriety outside of A.A. Sobriety may be possible for such a person if an all-powerful God is the key to her sobriety. Ultimately, it is an individual choice and an individual choice must be made from the subjective experience of the alcoholic, not an alcoholic who solely defines herself as a member of the A.A. group.

### **Conclusion**

Whether or not alcoholism is a disease, a genetic predisposition, a behavior anomaly, or just a series of bad choices, the alcoholic in our society deserves to be dealt with honestly and justly. Clearly he or she must bear the responsibility for the choices he makes—driving drunk, hurting his family and friends, and the numerous other consequences that may result from his drinking behavior. But holding up A.A. as the overall solution to alcoholism suggests that American society is either ignorant of A.A.'s insistence upon religion and sexism, or that it chooses to ignore this duplicity. If alcoholism is a condition that is truly beyond a person's control, a lifelong illness, then to send an alcoholic to an organization that tells him he is spiritually and morally diseased is cruel. In A.A., the alcoholic learns he must accept God or face hopelessness. In addition, A.A. presents itself as an all-powerful solution to his drinking; the alcoholic learns he can

only receive help for his drinking through contact within the A.A. group; to resist or cut off such contact it to doom oneself to failure. Living an authentic life in the wake of such “alternatives” becomes next to impossible. If the recovering alcoholic is to experience greater freedom, greater hope for living authentically, A.A. itself must undergo change.

As I’ve shown in this thesis, A.A.’s claim that it is not religious is disingenuous and inauthentic. While A.A. says that an alcoholic may choose her own version of a “higher power,” its literature repeatedly refers to a patriarchal God, revealing A.A.’s roots in Protestantism. The idea that only God can save the alcoholic from herself is a religious notion. I’m not suggesting that A.A. change its belief system—A.A. does work for many alcoholics—but that it make its heritage and religious ideas transparent. If A.A. truly does not hold to any denomination, the reciting of the Lord’s Prayer at group meetings will cease. It follows that A.A. will also either identify a prayer as having Christian roots so that non-Christians may choose not to participate, or excise these prayers (the “Prayer of St. Francis,” for example) from its books altogether. A.A. can’t authentically claim that it is not religious—or Christian—when it insists on Christian prayers for its members.

A revision of the text is mandatory if A.A. is to authentically reach out to women and minorities. A.A.’s literature is gender-biased and sexist. Worse, it is completely deceptive and inauthentic in its chapter, “To Wives.” It is absurd to ask its female, non-Christian, and gay members to just insert themselves into the masculine language. The sexism of the literature goes beyond pronouns; its very ideas come from masculinist viewpoints. For women to make authentic choices in A.A., the literature must be updated to include them in its viewpoints. Women and men have different social histories. It won’t be enough just to generalize the language. Women must be specifically addressed.



It's understandable that A.A. would want to retain Bill Wilson's original primary texts, but this literature should be considered in its historical context. The literature that the groups read in daily meetings and with sponsors should change to reflect society's growing consciousness. A.A.'s *Big Book* and *12 and 12* are not the bible. They should not be treated as such. Doing so only alienates women and minorities. It alienates those who do not hold religious beliefs. Agnostics and atheists should be honestly dealt with in A.A., not given the message that they only "think" they are agnostic and will eventually come around to a spiritual way of living. If A.A. maintains its belief that only a spiritual life will help an alcoholic recover, then A.A. should communicate to the agnostic or atheist that he may not find a sober life in A.A. unless he changes his views about God. Deception and manipulation are not acceptable means of encouraging an agnostic or atheist to join the A.A. life.

Finally, to say that those who "will not or cannot accept" A.A. are "constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves," is the worst kind of manipulation. It tells a suffering alcoholic that if he cannot—or "will not"—accept A.A.'s principles, he is dishonest and inauthentic. This statement suggests that the *only* way for an alcoholic to recover is through A.A. If the alcoholic does not choose the A.A. way of life, he is not only being dishonest with himself, he is at fault for not recovering. In saying this, A.A. takes no responsibility for the idea that it might offer a way of life that is not authentic for such an individual, it, in fact, denies individuality. For a message that is supposed to give hope to an alcoholic, it does just the opposite. The alcoholic is told that his dishonesty renders him incapable of accepting A.A.'s program, thus he will not be able to get sober because it is only through A.A. that he can achieve sobriety. The message: Accept A.A.

or lose your life to alcoholism. This is a form of bad faith because it tells the alcoholic there is nothing else he can do to recover from his alcoholism. There is no proof that this is true, and furthermore, there is evidence to the contrary.

Living in bad faith is also a danger for the alcoholic who believes that since he suffers from a disease, it is determined that he is helpless to change. If the alcoholic is truly a slave to drink, then choosing to recover is a choice toward freedom. The twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous offer one way for many alcoholics to recover. But for society to continue with its popular suggestion that it is the only way is unacceptable. After all, if alcoholism is truly a medical illness, then science may ultimately be able to offer a cure. Society must remain open to this possibility. The idea that God, via A.A., is the only way for an alcoholic to recover from a “disease,” is archaic. More attention needs to be paid, not just to developing alternative treatments for the alcoholic, but to considering them.

It may be that the alcoholic has been searching for a spiritual life or transcendence all along. But since the alcoholic experience is generally shot through with states of delusion and self-deception, opportunities for authentic choice are diminished. If the alcoholic seeks freedom from the cycle of drinking, she faces further challenges to authenticity when she goes to A.A. Living an authentic life for an alcoholic may ultimately be impossible unless she is able to make the Kierkegaardian leap of faith based on her own subjective experience. At that point, she is not making the choice toward God because A.A. or society tells her to, but because that is what she has genuinely come to believe on her own. This leap of faith may not be a viable choice for every alcoholic; it is contingent upon whether or not the alcoholic is willing to believe in God. That is

something only an individual can decide. It is society's moral responsibility to ensure that the non-believing alcoholic has further options for recovery. The more choices the alcoholic has to effectively deal with her condition, the greater the chance she has toward freedom. Authenticity is a multi-faceted challenge for an alcoholic, for A.A., and ultimately, for society.

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