

Brian Campbell

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Professors Loriaux, Crépon, Jaromin

A Task for a Lifetime:

Alcoholics Anonymous and the Existential Route to Recovery

“A.A. is not a plan for recovery that can be finished and done with. It is a way of life, and the challenge contained in its principles is great enough to keep any human being striving for as long as he lives. We do not, cannot, outgrow this plan. As arrested alcoholics, we must have a program for living that allows for limitless expansion.”¹

“So the task of becoming subjective is supposed to be the highest set for every person, just as, correspondingly, the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective; or rather, comes to be only for the person who becomes subjective. Furthermore, the task of becoming subjective should give a person plenty to do for as long as he lives, so that it is not the eager person but only the restless fidget who manages to have done with life before life has had done with him. And the fidget should not be entitled to speak slightly of life, but rather be obliged to understand that he has probably failed to get a proper grasp of life’s task; for otherwise it would go without saying that this task lasts as long as life itself, this life’s task, that of living.”²

¹ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), p. 275.

² Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2009), p. 137.

Modernity has given rise to vast, sweeping changes in the expressions and objectives of power. In particular these expressions have evolved past the merely repressive and punitive to become productive forces, permeating all of society but especially located in institutions like schools, prisons and hospitals. The 20th century philosopher Michel Foucault famously characterizes and historically situates these changes in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1975). At the limit of this new Foucauldian power, I would like to argue, stands the alcoholic, who has been subject often to the whole range of disciplines with the aim of recovery, yet only finds herself changed by *Alcoholics Anonymous*³, which is not an instance of disciplinary power. I admit that appearances might suggest otherwise. But AA's philosophy denies the possibility of reaching the horizon of perfection, which the disciplines tacitly believe to be attainable. Also the program's radical democracy marks it apart from the panopticon's disciplinary power whose relative democracy still obeys a strict partitioning between "guard" and "inmate"⁴. Rather, the experience of recovery and empowerment in AA follows an existential-religious pattern, and accordingly I argue that making sense of this experience demands a look, not at mechanisms of power, but rather at aspects of existentialism.

Stories in the Big Book offer a glimpse of what Martin Heidegger deems the call of conscience. Thus we will have to see how a close reading of portions of his famous *Being*

³ Henceforth "AA," while outside of citations I will refer to the book of the same name as the Big Book, which the primary text of AA is affectionately called by its adherents. In citations this text is called *Alcoholics Anonymous* and attributed to one of AA's founders, Bill W. Although he pens some framing materials, most of the Big Book consists of stories by individuals who have found success and sobriety through the program.

⁴ I will continue using these terms to designate figures having certain roles in the Panopticon model of power, the guard being the observing figure in the literal or metaphorical center and the inmate being the person subject to observation and/or experimentation. Following Foucault, in modern institutions the same logic is instantiated between teacher and pupil, doctor and patient, factory foreman and laborer, etc.

and Time (1927) alongside AA's seminal text suggests that what AA summons the addict to do is recognize this call and respond to it in such a way that Dasein appropriates its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self. Indeed, for the sufferer alcoholism appears consistently as a misfortune assailing the individual from beyond her control, a circumstance into which she has been thrown and to which she must respond authentically. The call of conscience summons Dasein back from the "they," from the reasons *they* drink. Heidegger and AA will diverge in their interpretations of the "alien" quality of the call, but both agree that it calls Dasein back to something more original and primordial than any specific instance of guilt or a particular moral transgression. This something is exactly what the call simultaneously summons Dasein forth to reclaim, to take hold of, to become authentically responsible for, and so hearing the call exactly means accepting ownership of one's life and decisions. Where Heidegger's search for this call's origin leads him inward, to an aspect of Dasein itself, AA will prefer to point outwards to a "higher power."

I believe this thorny contradiction in the two analyses can be managed with the help of Soren Kierkegaard. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846) he characterizes affairs of faith, love and immortality as subjective projects of appropriation rather than issues that can be resolved objectively. We can describe the alcoholic's passing over into sobriety with AA as an analogue to his understanding of subjectivity. Objective knowledge, he argues, is propositional and can be communicated directly, but the subjective needs to be drawn out of the individual, made manifest in her every thought and action; it therefore can only be communicated indirectly. The emphasis on repetition (*every* thought, *every* action) and commitment echoes AA's solution to the

sickness that is alcoholism in that sobriety for the alcoholic is an unending deed and demands lived appropriation of belief. So, like Kierkegaard's subjective knowledge, it continues without end, is indeed a task for a lifetime.

The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* famously ends with a revocation of most of the book itself. A similar revocation, I hope to make clear, could (and perhaps ought to) follow the Big Book as well, given that the least desirable result of reading either would be to have understood the content objectively. Kierkegaard worries that someone might read his work and think "Aha! Now I understand Christianity and find it compelling, believable, and therefore I am a Christian," without making the subjective leap of faith. Similarly, understanding AA, knowing the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions⁵, puts the alcoholic reader not terribly ahead of the place where she started; what matters is the appropriation. I hope we can come full circle: if AA appears at a glance to resemble an institution of Foucauldian power, it is because of its reliance on indirect communication. Disseminating propositional knowledge is not the task at hand, so AA needs groups and sociality.

I. Impervious to Discipline

"I had undergone three stays in a psychiatric hospital. God knows I didn't want to drink, yet to my great despair, I always returned to the infernal merry-go-ground."⁶ This sort of detail appears and reappears throughout the forty-two personal stories collected

⁵ The 12 Steps refer to those actions that AA recommends to alcoholics, to ward off relapse and generally improve their emotional and spiritual life. The traditions refer to AA's recommendations for groups, which include anonymity, optional donation as the mode of financial support, and so on. Both have come to serve as a model for groups attempting to deal with a variety of addiction problems including, for example, those involving narcotics, sex and gambling.

⁶ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 195.

between the covers of the Big Book. Consistently alcoholics who have been subject to rigorous examination, surveillance and confinement find that these experiences have little to no effect on their behavior, as they either sneak booze into their facilities or leave the institution without the strength to remain sober. It might be the case that these individuals have been subject to such discipline at the behest of their loved ones or at the command of the law, and never took their reform as an interest of their own. Hence, the argument would go, discipline never had the chance to affect them, given they had already closed themselves off to the possibility of reform. Their own reticence and latent desire to drink reduced the institution's efficacy. But, testimony disagrees:

When I entered a sanitarium for prolonged and intensive psychiatric treatment, I was convinced that I was having a serious mental breakdown. I wanted help, and I tried to cooperate... Naturally, in spite of my good intentions, in spite of my protected life behind sanitarium walls, I several times got drunk and was astounded.⁷

Whether their internment occurred against their will or with their eager cooperation, the multiple institutions of disciplinary power, emblematic of modern society, failed to achieve the changes sought after by alcoholics.

So in attempting to elucidate the experience of alcoholism and recovery in the program we might begin by pointing to what it is not. Externally, participation in AA amounts to fairly consistent attendance at AA meetings, and thus one might be tempted to study the program as an instance of Foucauldian disciplinary power. After all, throughout the Big Book the reader finds suggestions that continual devotion to AA and active participation are necessary for sustained sobriety and true recovery. Given that this devotion and participation amounts in practice to meeting with other alcoholics and given

⁷ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 204-205.

that many groups choose to award “chips” for various durations of sobriety, the organization might be read as an instance of the panopticon, a model of power proposed by Jeremy Bentham and elaborated upon by Foucault. But underpinning the implementation of Panoptical power lies an assumption that man is perfectible (if coerced properly) as well as a strict partition between the inmate figure and the guard figure, both of which AA rejects entirely.

Of course, Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon focuses on the transformations that the disciplines apply to the exercise of power, as this exercise moves away from repressive forms which threaten death and towards productive forms that modify behavior. The extent to which these new power structures can or do in fact enact their desired modifications, therefore, does not receive explicit treatment in *Discipline and Punish*. His interest lies rather in the historical genealogy of power and its modes or channels of expression. But nonetheless his chapter on the panopticon will incidentally reveal the Enlightenment era optimism regarding the perfectibility of humans individually and thus of humanity altogether, an optimism which no doubt informed Bentham’s original proposal. Foucault will, on the other hand, look directly at the division between guard and prisoner in this architectural instrument of power, as it affects the efficiency and range of application of panoptical power.

Foucault describes first the models of power best exemplified, in his analysis, by the treatment of the leper and by the quarantine procedure of a plague-stricken town. The person suffering from leprosy “gave rise to rituals of exclusion”⁸ in which he or she was subjected to processes of individuation and isolation, whereas the town hit by the plague

⁸ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 198.

brought about a totalizing project of control and surveillance, to prevent the contagion's spread. The panopticon unites these methods of power expression by isolating its prisoners from one another and subjecting them to a surveillance of which they are perpetually aware. With the birth of panoptical models of power came the attempt to make proper citizens out of disadvantaged youth who appeared abnormal in their "ignorance of God [and] idleness (with its consequent drunkenness, impurity, larceny, brigandage)."⁹ The sanitariums and hospitals through which many alcoholics in the Big Book recount passing are the successors of this panoptical enterprise. But in its Enlightenment origins this model of productive power, to be successful, assumes that its targeted human defects and abnormalities can be worked at and done away with. The exercise of royal power, with its threat of death or radical exclusion, assumes that abnormal behavior must be simply cut off from society. On the other hand, "the concern with a punishment that is a correction, a therapy, a normalization" along with "the division of the act of judgement between various authorities that are supposed to measure, assess, diagnose, cure, transform individuals—all this betrays the penetration of the disciplinary examination into the juridical inquisition."¹⁰

But AA denies at the outset the possibility of any such disciplinary power liberating the alcoholic from her addiction. Indeed, "we have seen the truth demonstrated again and again: 'Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic.'"¹¹ We should consider here Carl Jung's brief appearance in the Big Book. After having "floundered from one sanitarium to another," one alcoholic ended up "placing himself in the care of a celebrated physician (the psychiatrist,

⁹ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 210.

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 227.

¹¹ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 33.

Dr. Jung).¹² Believing himself to have learned a great deal about his psyche and his shortcomings, “he finished his treatment with unusual confidence,” but found himself drunk shortly thereafter, prompting a return to Jung. In the latter’s professional opinion this alcoholic was “utterly hopeless” with but one caveat, and was told “he would have to place himself under lock and key or hire a bodyguard if he expected to live long.” Thus after the reforming aspect of the Panoptical model of power has repeatedly and unequivocally failed, Jung supposes that this coerced self-improvement lies outside of the alcoholic’s reach. However, and here the caveat, he tells our alcoholic that:

Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in awhile, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences... They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. In fact, I have been trying to produce some such emotional rearrangement within you. With many individuals the methods which I employed are successful, but I have never been successful with an alcoholic of your description.

This spiritual experience, which AA attempts to prompt within the alcoholic who approaches it for help, occurs outside of the network of disciplinary powers pervading modern life, and this resistance to ordinary social models of power and behavior modification prompts the existential analysis towards which we are heading.

Besides differing in its estimation of power’s ability to affect the relevant change in the individual’s behavior, AA lacks even the partition between guard and prisoner that makes panoptical disciplinary power possible at all. Foucault emphasizes a certain democracy as characteristic of this modality of power by citing the sense in which the guards themselves are subject to discipline from others, as “it will even be possible to

¹² W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 26.

observe the director himself.”¹³ Since even a cursory glance by a third party will expose the incompetent director, the panopticon exerts its power even upon those nominally tasked with exercising said power. And this is in addition to the fact that the director’s presence itself is fairly superfluous; as long as the inmates are made to believe that they are being scrutinized, the director need not be there in actual fact. But this democracy of discipline never goes as far as eliminating the distinction between guard and inmate, between the (even if just hypothetical) observer and the observed.

Yet AA does get rid of this partition. Groups are composed merely of alcoholics united to help one another. In fact “any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation” and in turn a group “should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience.”¹⁴ “Conscience,” we will soon see, is far from accidental word choice, as much of the recovery for the individual depends on her response to conscience, in a Heideggerian sense. In the “Twelve Traditions” portion of the Big Book, to which I have just referred, we find guidelines for AA as an organization, and some of these guidelines cause it to push at the limits of what can properly be called an “organization,” given how the traditions emphasize groups’ independence from any AA headquarters as well as a lack of hierarchy within groups. The most visible founding member, Bill W., described AA as a “benign anarchy.”¹⁵ This lack of organizational structure, of hierarchized and rigid distributions of bodies, of relationships invested with power, altogether they signify even more clearly essential differences between AA and Foucauldian disciplinary power.

¹³ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 204.

¹⁴ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 563.

¹⁵ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Pub.), 1957, p.225.

No, rather than an institution of power, AA offers a religious-existential model for living one's life which encourages, or better, which makes sobriety possible for the worst-case alcoholic whom institutions have failed. I would like to emphasize the "existential" in "religious-existential," because the experience of recovery under AA maps well onto the process which, in the second division of *Being and Time*, Heidegger, an atheist, calls "wanting to have a conscience."

II. The Call of Conscience as a "Higher Power"

In the case of the alcoholic, I will argue, we witness conscience's factual attestation to Dasein's primordial Being-guilty most clearly, most easily. And so it is in this specificity, that of the alcoholic, that the universal and generalized experience of conscience's attesting to Being-guilty can be read in its highest relief. Conscience calls Dasein back from the "they," and specifically from the motivations of *their* drinking, *their* justification for behavior. Heidegger and AA merely diverge in their reception of the "alien" quality of the call, its factual coming from the self and yet from beyond the self. Whereas AA will emphasize the call's apparent coming from beyond oneself, Heidegger stresses its apparent coming from oneself, leading to his conclusion that the caller must be Dasein's own potentiality-for-Being-its-Self. But in either case this call unveils, by attesting to, Dasein's characteristic primordial Being-guilty. Acknowledgement of this aspect of Dasein, and its attendant ultimate responsibility for one's actions, comprises the crucial second and third steps of AA's famous twelve-step model for recovery, as we will see.

A perpetual struggle facing the alcoholic seeking sobriety exists in resisting the urge to allow the they-self to gain the upper hand in the constitution of Dasein. Society and das

Man¹⁶ offer up a plentitude of socially acceptable reasons for drinking which the problem drinker can invoke to justify her taking a drink. Indeed, Heidegger finds that prior to hearing the call of conscience we “take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure.”¹⁷ One alcoholic testifies to this reality describing how he “would invariably reward [himself] for [his] efforts with that ‘first’ drink.”¹⁸ Celebrations, sociality, but also the trying times of failed romances, grieving in general, all these generate occasions for the individual to choose actions as *they* choose actions, the action in this case being drinking. However, while of course one rides the subway as *they* ride the subway, ties her shoes as *they* tie their shoes, and so on, these examples lack a certain gravitas or importance. In such relatively frivolous cases, Heidegger would say that choosing to ride the subway in the common everyday manner ought to be decided upon with awareness of one’s responsibility for this decision, as opposed to being merely carried along in the tidal flow of socially normal behavior. The latter would amount to inauthenticity. But with the alcoholic, succumbing to the ‘first’ drink as *they* do carries grave consequences, and therefore I find this figure exemplary of Dasein as thrown into a world offering readymade patterns for behavior which Dasein must take up authentically or resist altogether.

A housewife who took to drinking at home also recalls her participation in *their* imbibing as a means of escape and release: “I *had* to clear my mind and free it from worry, I

¹⁶ I will use the German often because, as with “Dasein,” Heidegger here does not translate perfectly and “das Man” means “the one” but is used as a vague indefinite pronoun closer to usage of a non-specific “they” in English. Capitalization is also a rule for nouns in German but leaving the capitalization seems to reify the “they” in a helpful way.

¹⁷ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 127, Heidegger’s pagination used throughout.

¹⁸ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 225.

had to relax.”¹⁹ The extreme importance, in many cases life-or-death importance, of Dasein’s ability to resist partaking in *their* drinking habits prompts us to engage in an analysis of Heidegger’s work in *Being and Time*’s second division on the call of conscience. After all, the call “does not call him into the public idle talk of the ‘they’, but *calls him back* from this *into the reticence of his existent* potentiality-for-Being.”²⁰ For Heidegger, the content of this call, strictly speaking, is nothing. It is only in the ontical and everyday experience of conscience that we experience it as a reprimand or a scolding, a “Guilty!” which has as content some previous action or failure to act. Ontologically, the call “has nothing to tell”²¹ but rather Dasein summons itself to itself by ignoring or overlooking the they-self and directing Dasein to its ownmost isolation and therefore responsibility. I will argue that hearing the call (wanting-to-have-a-conscience) serves as the nontheistic interpretation of AA’s second and third steps. But this demands accounting for the seemingly alien nature of the call’s origin.

An alcoholic whose story is recounted in the Big Book and who is given the placeholder name “Jim” comes into contact with the program but does not fully subscribe to or invest himself in the twelve steps. He describes being sober for a period of time and consequently gaining self-confidence with regard to drinking. At a café for lunch he finds himself drinking milk when the thought occurs to him that, given his recent success, he might have a drink, almost as a test for himself:

I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I vaguely sensed I was not being any too smart, but felt reassured as I was taking the whiskey on a full stomach. The experiment went so well that I ordered another whiskey... ²²

¹⁹ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 296, italics preserved.

²⁰ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 277, italics preserved.

²¹ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 273.

²² W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 36.

I suspect that everyone can relate to or understand this “vague sense” of making a mistake or engaging in risky behavior. As I write this paper I reach a point of confusion or uncertainty and my cursor glides towards the icon for Google Chrome which I can open in order to check my e-mail, social media accounts, the NBA scores, or any number of things which would distract me from the task at hand. Immediately I am assailed by this vague sense of guilt. This is exactly the call of conscience to which AA hopes to provide the courage and strength for listening. In its vagueness the call offers itself up to multiple interpretations, and here the philosophy of Heidegger will diverge from that of AA, but in a way which is merely apparent, for the latter can subsume the former’s thought on the nature of the call of conscience thanks to an early alcoholic’s reticence regarding spirituality. After accounting for the apparent divergence we will see how the modification this agnostic forced upon AA’s philosophy allows it to recapture a notion of conscience like Heidegger’s.

This sense of moral responsibility with which we are all familiar has a certain uncanniness in that while it clearly comes in some fashion from myself, from within me, it also reveals itself to me as a surprise, in spite of myself. Thus, Heidegger decides that the call “comes *from me* and yet *from beyond me*” because it occurs “against our expectations and even against our will,” but “on the other hand, the call undoubtedly does not come from someone else who is with me in the world.”²³ At this point, we are faced with an interpretative decision to make, in accounting for conscience will we emphasize its alterity or its identity with regard to the self?

²³ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 275, italics preserved.

After the first step of AA's twelve, which is admitting powerlessness over alcohol, comes two steps, both involving surrender to conscience. After having recognized her inability to drink responsibly, the AA adherent "came to believe that a Power greater than [herself] could restore [her] to sanity" (second step) and then "made a decision to turn [her] will and [her life] over to the care of God *as [she] understood Him*."²⁴ In this interpretation, which emphasizes the alterity of the call of conscience, Heidegger would say that "one takes the power itself as a person who makes himself known—namely God,"²⁵ and as an atheist he rejects this interpretation. For him such a conclusion regarding the call of conscience exposes an ontological bias for presence. In the Western epistemological tradition, things must be subject to an analysis that is objective and divests the subject from herself, so even though invoking a deity is far from scientific, it nonetheless posits the conscience as a manifestation of something analyzable as separate from Dasein, and which stands in relation to it. Rejecting this dogma, he claims that the call's seemingly alien nature "does not justify seeking the caller in some entity with a character other than that of Dasein."²⁶ Thus, Heidegger finds that the sense in which the call of conscience comes from the self discloses more truth than its apparent alterity.

"What if," he asks a bit rhetorically, the Dasein "which finds itself in the very depths of its uncanniness, should be the caller of the call of conscience?"²⁷ Under this interpretation, Dasein is both caller and called. The Dasein experiencing the anxiety of its being thrown into a world, with responsibility for itself, calls to the part of Dasein that has taken flight from this anxiety into the comfort of *das Man* and the they-self. In other words

²⁴ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 59, italics preserved.

²⁵ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 275.

²⁶ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 276.

²⁷ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 276.

Dasein calls itself. The Dasein which runs at full speed away from its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self experiences conscience as this original thrown Dasein calling after it: asking it to return from inauthenticity in behaving unquestioningly as das Man behaves, asking it to return to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self. Indeed, Heidegger locates the caller in the call of conscience within Dasein, identifying it with Dasein under one of its modalities. Clearly, this clashes with the interpretation chosen by AA, which highlights the caller's alterity, as testified in one personal story when an alcoholic recalls that after years of daily drinking she found herself lamenting how much alcohol it now took to provide her relief, "something in my head—and I know it wasn't me—said, 'So why bother?'"²⁸ I would like to suggest, however, that ultimately this act of naming and designating (inside me, outside me) has no relevance for the lived process of recovery in AA, by showing that Heidegger could participate without compromising his beliefs, and further drawing out AA's parallels to Heidegger's analysis of the call of conscience.

Say a Heideggerian scholar found herself an alcoholic on the rocks and looking for a way out. If exposed to AA she might feel like this woman did at first: "I couldn't stomach religion, and I didn't like the mention of God or any of the other capital letters... I was an intellectual and I needed an intellectual answer, not an emotional one."²⁹ There are many similar cases to be found in the testimonies throughout the big book, stories of men and women who balked at the religiosity of the AA program. One such man came into AA fairly early in the history of the program (in the 1930's). In his first try with AA he "took every opportunity to lambaste that 'spiritual angle,' as [they] called it, or anything else that had

²⁸ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 334.

²⁹ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 205.

any tinge of theology,"³⁰ although he stuck around and appreciated the idea of people coming together with a common goal: beating addiction. However, he relapsed and was forced to reconsider his resistance to the spiritual or religious side of AA. Recalcitrant nonetheless, the only "higher power" he began to acknowledge was that of the group and his only contribution to the authorship of the big book's first edition was "that the word *God* should be qualified with the phrase 'as we understand Him'—for that was the only way [he] could accept spirituality."³¹ Given this caveat and the frequent preference for the term "higher power" in place of "God," I can imagine our hypothetical Heidegger scholar taking Dasein in its potentiality-for-Being-its-Self as her higher power and hearing the call to conscience as such. More to the point, one alcoholic testifies to his lingering agnosticism in the Big Book, "I can say that having such an experience didn't lead me to any certainty about God. Alcoholics Anonymous gives me the freedom to believe and to doubt as much as I need to."³²

But moreover, and more importantly, if we can bracket for a moment the formal theological differences between Heidegger's philosophy and that of AA, we might take time to appreciate even more extensively the parallels between the two, the sense in which AA offers the alcoholic a Heideggerian project designed to foster Jung's so-called "vital spiritual experience." Specifically the two perspectives converge in their emphasis on becoming aware of a primordial Being-guilty which, once noticed, implies that the call of conscience is experienced not only as a retroactive condemnation ("Guilty!"), but also as a calling-forth into authenticity.

³⁰ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 228.

³¹ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 229.

³² W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 374.

For Heidegger, the factual experience of feeling a pang of guilt unveils, exposes or references a more ontological basic structure of Being-guilty. Indeed, prior to any existentiell, emotional guilt, prior actually to any conception of morality at all, there exists in Dasein the structure of Being-guilty. Far from being something socially imposed or constructed, or something to be explained away biologically, to the extent that Dasein is thrown in its singularity into the world, this same Dasein can fall into lostness in the they, it already risks Being-guilty: not taking ownership of its potentiality-for-Being. Hence, all morality is made possible at all by Dasein's responsibility for itself, to live authentically or inauthentically. This primordial Being-guilty is the subject of the call to conscience in both Heidegger and AA. The former admits that ontically the call manifests itself most often retroactively, as guilt. This is no less true for the alcoholic and so AA especially will need to account for the call's ontic manifestations pointing into the past.

That is, one might object that AA primarily thinks or works in terms of the future, generating or creating a plan of action one day at a time. Conscience, on the other hand, tends to reveal itself with regard to past events. I feel guilty or indebted for some action I have already committed, or an action that I have failed to choose. Yet the inevitability of ontological, structural, primordial Being-guilty means that it is something to which morality and guilt make reference *as well as* something which can be taken up as responsibility. Heidegger writes of this duality:

The voice does call back, but it calls beyond the deed which has happened, and back to the Being-guilty into which one has been thrown, which is 'earlier' than any indebtedness. But at the same time, this calling-back calls forth to *Being-guilty*, as something to be seized upon in one's own existence.³³

³³ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 291.

The second and third steps of AA, the core of its injunction to surrender to “God” or “God’s will,” amount to exactly this aspect of conscience, which calls Dasein forth to seize its Being-guilty. Since surrendering to AA, the housewife cited earlier claims that “when I’m asked to go out on a call, I go. *I’m not going; AA is leading me there.*”³⁴ Again in her diction we see AA’s tendency to focus on the alterity, the apparent alienness of the call of conscience, but in practice this amounts to just the same model for living: hearing and obeying the commands issued from what Heidegger will not call God but rather thrown Dasein’s primordial Being-guilty. In his terminology one is not surrendering to an alien power but rather “what is chosen is *having-a-conscience* as Being-free for one’s ownmost Being-guilty.”³⁵ Clearly, despite the divergence in naming the call of conscience (in placing it either within or outside of one’s self), the structure of AA’s philosophy, a process of taking up one’s essential Being-guilty and in turn listening to conscience at each turn, along with the testimony of those who have chosen to live under it, exemplifies Heidegger’s explanation for the call of conscience and its attestation to a potentiality-for-Being. In the other direction, the reticence with regard to religion expressed by the alcoholics previously cited suggests that what matters for AA is the ability to hear and then listen to one’s call of conscience, regardless of how one might analyze its structure and origins.

Having now surmounted this difficulty, that of reincorporating into AA Heidegger’s explanation of conscience as a call coming from an aspect or a modality of Dasein, and moreover having showed that even choosing the theistic interpretation of AA means acknowledging ownership and responsibility for one’s self (authenticity), we are ready to see how this process, which Kierkegaard calls becoming subjective, is a task for a lifetime

³⁴ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 300.

³⁵ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p. 288.

and one which AA must teach indirectly. Moreover, his distinction between objectivity and subjectivity will further display the compatibility of AA with Heidegger's analysis.

III. Kierkegaard, Alcoholics Anonymous and Subjective Appropriation

In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard attempts to make a distinction between subjective and objective knowledge, and much of this distinction he brings to light by describing the ways in which each can be imparted from one person to another. Namely, objective knowledge can be communicated directly, but subjective knowledge is only communicated indirectly. Historical knowledge falls under the "objective" heading and so "if, for example, someone says that Frederick VI is Emperor of China, we call it a lie."³⁶ But, if we understand it correctly, a proposition of the form "I love you" or "I believe in God" cannot be treated or tested for veracity as independent of its speaker. And rather than these two categories serving as containers for sets of mutually exclusive items, which can only be known either objectively or subjectively, but not both, the difference appears most in the treatment of things whose truth can be assessed under either rubric. Accordingly, Kierkegaard's main project, and his reason for developing these categories in the first place, is arguing that the essence of Christianity lies in the subjective relationship to its tenets rather than in their objective truth, which could be quarreled over without any chance of a definitive resolution. This lack of resolution leaves one with the impression that the "[objective] method is the correct one yet the learned scholars have still to succeed" and so the "subject's personal, infinite,

³⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 142.

impassioned interest gradually vanishes because the decision is postponed.”³⁷ Here Kierkegaard’s concern is that his reader loses herself in objectivity and its attendant postponement of decision, which I find an equally serious risk for the addict seeking recovery in a twelve-step program, and moreover this desire to impart subjective knowledge indirectly explains the emphasis on engagement and participation which gives AA its resemblance to disciplinary power as already discussed.

But first we ought to make as clear as possible the difference between objectivity and subjectivity in Kierkegaard’s thought. He uses immortality as one example and resists the temptation to consider the notion abstractly, in the way that philosophers and theologians could and have discussed its possibility for ages without ever reaching a conclusion. This approach divests the subject of herself by making the question about immortality in general, as opposed to the subjective question of whether I, the existing individual, can (perhaps through Christianity) become immortal myself. Objectively, truth resides only in the veracity of the object to which the individual relates, without regard to her participation or activity. “If the truth is asked about subjectively,” however, “reflection is directed subjectively on the individual’s relation, if only the how of this relation is in truth, then the individual is in truth, even if he related in this way to untruth.”³⁸ The difficulty lies in the joke Kierkegaard opens this chapter with: “Objectively, one always speaks only to the matter at issue; subjectively one speaks of the subject and subjectivity—and then, what do you know, subjectivity is the matter at issue!”³⁹ In the mode of direct communication the teacher and the student stand apart from the object of knowledge. But

³⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 24.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 168.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 107.

one can speak objectively *of* subjectivity, thus taking the relationship an individual (say, a student) has with her project as a thing standing apart from the teacher and student, an abstract manner of relating to something. Then, the manner of relating is to be studied objectively, and subjectivity is indeed the matter at issue.

So while it is easy to raise eyebrows at the suggestion that the work of Heidegger, a staunch atheist, and the apparently very religious aspects of AA can be so quickly reconciled, this distinction between objective and subjective inquiry dissolves the tension. For clarification, consider Kierkegaard's famous and rather heretical contention that the manner in which one prays might mean more than the deity to which she is praying:

If someone living in the midst of Christianity enters the house of God, the house of the true God, knowing the true conception of God, and now prays but prays untruly, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol—where then is there more truth? The one prays truly to God though he worships an idol; the other prays untruly to the true God, and therefore truly worships an idol.⁴⁰

With this in mind we can immediately we see how the alcoholic who takes her higher power to be Heidegger's "call to conscience" might pray truly despite "worshipping an idol," because asking subjectively, the truth-status or reality of the entity to which one is directing their attention falls away as irrelevant. This leaves only the subjective truth of her attention as either passionately involved or performative and inauthentic, like the spirituality of the New Testament Pharisees who fast and pray only to be seen fasting and praying. An authentic, interested and passionate relationship with God or "God" cannot come as the result of an objective analysis, mired, as it must be, in the patient wait for further evidence and argumentation. An alcoholic testifies: "spirituality is the way we feel

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 169.

about what we do... It's about my personal contact with my personal Higher Power, as I understand Him."⁴¹ The distinctions that Kierkegaard next uses to characterize this form of subjective knowledge mirror the rhetoric found in the Big Book and include both a nuanced and unorthodox account of the difference between thought and action, as well as an emphasis on sustained practice and repetition as evidence of one's subjectivity. Finally, we will see how communicating subjective affairs characterized as such demands sociality.

With regard to thought and action, Kierkegaard quickly discards the extreme position according to which thought were actuality, in which case there can be no action at all, given that a thought already has the status of action. But moreover, he rejects the Hegelian idea that action only inheres in the external. Rather:

If there is to be any distinction at all between thought and action, this can only be sustained by assigning possibility, disinterestedness, and objectivity to thinking—action to subjectivity...What is actual is not the external action but an internality in which the individual cancels the possibility and identifies himself with what is thought, in order to exist in it.⁴²

To illustrate this point, Kierkegaard discusses briefly the parable of the Good Samaritan. He imagines the callous Levite who passed by the victim laying on the side of the street experiences a change of heart some ways down the road. Accordingly, he experiences a pang of guilt and this call of conscience summons him into action, to turn around and go back to help this unfortunate fellow. But should the Good Samaritan have arrived before him, his assistance will never have had the chance to manifest itself externally, yet we must say the Levite acted. It is likewise with a person attempting to quit drinking. She is resolute in her intention not to drink at a function, which she will be attending over the weekend.

⁴¹ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 406.

⁴² Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 284.

Provided she commits earnestly and passionately to this course of action, so much so that going back on her intentions is to her an impossibility, then according to Kierkegaard we must say she acted on sobriety, even if upon arriving she was surprised to find no alcohol being served at this particular event.

But because action belongs to subjectivity, it must be stressed that the individual negates in her being the possibility of going back on her action, or else there is no action in the first place, but mere speculation and disinterestedness. Kierkegaard uses faith to illustrate the importance of this internal commitment:

Having faith in God. Is that to think how glorious it must be to have faith, to think of the peace and security that faith can bestow? Not at all. Even to wish, where interest – the subject's interest – is far more evident, is not to have faith, not acting.⁴³

In unison, the Big Book acknowledges that time and time again alcoholics with good character and willpower in other arenas of life, and with plenty of thought wasted on how glorious sobriety must be, have found acting upon it impossible prior to encountering AA. Bill W. writes: "This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it—this utter inability to leave [alcohol] alone, no matter how great the necessity or the wish."⁴⁴ Regardless of their great desire to quit drinking, without the spiritual and psychological apparatus offered by AA, its instruction in heeding to a higher power, which manifests itself ontically as the call of conscience, countless alcoholics find themselves helpless.

And perhaps no passage from the *Postscript* will better resonate with the person struggling with addiction than the following, later in his account on the difference between thought and action. Here, Kierkegaard wants to admit that oftentimes it may appear that

⁴³ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 285.

⁴⁴ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 34.

thought materializes into action so rapidly that we might accurately say that, in these cases, what is thought is action, or actuality:

The fact that there are cases regarding evil where the transition from thought to action goes almost undetected is not denied, but these call for a special explanation. That has to do with the individual being subject to habit: by frequently making the transition from thought to action, he has, in the end, by becoming slave of a habit, lost control over the transition, which at *his expense* makes it go faster and faster.⁴⁵

The explanation for the alcoholic (pre-recovery) is “special” insofar as rather than demonstrating that, against Kierkegaard’s assertions, thought is indeed action, it invokes habit as something which renders the transition from thought (with the possibility of going back) into action (commitment, resolution) invisible. Indeed an alcoholic observes that despite his general and vague desire not to drink one moment, “I was up drinking a glass of wine the next. There was no conscious premeditation at all.”⁴⁶ That Kierkegaard’s pet example of choice tends to be faith should not surprise us at this point, given how AA teaches first and foremost a commitment to a higher power, which cannot be tried on like a costume only for one to become bored with and discard. “Half measures [have] availed us nothing,”⁴⁷ and instead, the alcoholic seeking help in AA must exist fully in her decision to heed the call of conscience, as the instantiation of her higher power.

This is not the only sense in which “half measures” never succeed for the alcoholic. It is often said that when an alcoholic claims that she will stop drinking for a month, or a week, or in any temporary fashion, then she is essentially already planning her relapse. Of course, if she can, and especially if she can without real difficulty, take a sustained break from consuming alcohol, then she probably fails to fit the definition of an alcoholic in the

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 285.

⁴⁶ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 371.

⁴⁷ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 59.

first place. The concern is that the true alcoholic allows herself a psychological escape hatch by persistently couching her attempts at sobriety in a defined period of time. This is true in the sense that if an especially tempting occasion confronts her in, for example, the first week of her sober month, she already has the justification to drink in the form of “well this was only temporary anyways.” The dual epigraphs opening this paper are intended to suggest that for an alcoholic sobriety is the task of a lifetime (in the same sense that matters of subjectivity are lifelong affairs for Kierkegaard) not because only having died many years sober can an alcoholic think herself recovered, but rather because if she wishes to regain her self-control and in the worst cases her very life, then she must be prepared to think of her task as one for a lifetime.

By no means should the assertion that action means a wholehearted commitment to a decision or proposition diminish the importance of repetition for Kierkegaard’s thought. Truly when our imaginary Levite changes his mind about helping the roadside victim but returns to find the Good Samaritan already assisting him, then he has acted already, and in this case his action bears a certain finality. So likewise the alcoholic who vows not to drink at a given party only to find no alcohol available has acted in a way that suggests a beginning and an end, but when the decision is also to abstain altogether, then this action bears repeating in every moment. Becoming subjective, with regard to matters such as awareness of one’s own inevitable death and faith in God, demands as much. The subjective individual struggles to live every moment with awareness of her eventual demise, so as to better inform her decision-making in life (and the possible influence of Kierkegaard’s discussion of this death-awareness on Heidegger seems salient but cannot be discussed here). For any individual “the development of the subjectivity consists precisely in his

actively implicating himself in his thought about his own existence” and this is to be done in such a way “that he does not just think for one moment, now you must take care every moment, but takes care every moment.”⁴⁸ Any alcoholic has the ability to (and probably the experience of) thinking for one moment, “to stay sober, I will have to take care every moment,” but the task at hand is to actually take care every moment, which is something AA recognizes. In language taken from an anecdote in the big book: “Alcoholics can stop drinking in many places and many ways—but Alcoholics Anonymous offers us a way to stay sober.”⁴⁹

In these ways, by emphasizing action as internal commitment and demonstrating the need for repetition in subjective actions, Kierkegaard shares AA’s obsession with the importance of appropriation compared to mere knowledge and desire. The big book’s many instances of alcoholics who, equipped with the knowledge of doctors and therapists along with an intense desire to cease drinking, still cannot seem to quit confirm Kierkegaard’s suspicion that regarding subjectivity and action, what matters is the individual’s relation to the object of knowledge or desire. When one’s nascent knowledge that she ought not drink manifests itself ontically as Hiedegger’s call to conscience, the extent to which the alcoholic identifies its origin as residing in God or herself matters infinitely less than how one relates to the call itself.

However, books in general communicate directly. The content is divorced from its speaker and then communicated to another subject as an object removed from either figure’s active relation to it, or appropriation of it. Since subjectivity is continual internal commitment, it must be drawn out of the student herself, as she is brought into a mindset

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 558.

or a world-orientation. This process Kierkegaard calls indirect communication. His esteem for this art form engenders a certain admiration for “Socrates, who as a rule kept so strictly to question and answer (which is an indirect method), because the long speech, the didactic lecture, the recitation lead only to confusion.”⁵⁰ These modes lead to a confused student, unless Socrates were to lecture on an objective matter such as world history, and to a confusion of the situation in general, because nothing is done to modify the student’s relationship with the topic. Well aware of this problem, the *Postscript* ends with an appendix revoking the book preceding it: “The book then is superfluous; so let no one take the trouble to appeal to it; for anyone who thus appeals to it has *eo ipso* misunderstood it.”⁵¹ To appeal to Kierkegaard in order to convince a person that what matters in being a Christian, thinking about death or achieving sobriety is subjective appropriation would be to revert to direct communication. In the language of his joke, the book form makes subjectivity into a “matter at issue” to be discussed objectively. I believe a parallel revocation could easily follow the big book, seeing as a thorough understanding of the program and its tenets gets that alcoholic not terribly further than the place in which she started. As an alcoholic, she knows already that she should not drink; what is needed is her continuously acting, in Kierkegaard’s sense, upon her call to conscience.

Although few appear within the big book, AA groups tend to be fond of short and suggestive platitudes: “One day at a time,” “Let go and let God,” etc. A particularly popular expression used to describe the recovery program by its adherents claims of AA that “it works if you work it,” and a testimony in the big book corroborates: “I keep coming back

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 232.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 521.

because it works.”⁵² Far from an anomaly, these stories are littered with reminders that it takes consistent participation to ensure continued sobriety. But if I’ve succeeded in bringing Kierkegaard’s philosophy to bear on AA, then the fact that a recovered alcoholic in the program may say she “became as compulsive about AA as [she] had been about drinking”⁵³ indicates *not* a coercive instantiation of Foucauldian power in which individuals subject themselves to behavior modification along panoptical lines, vying for sobriety chip from some sort of authority capable of subjecting alcoholics to systems of reward and punishment. Rather, this insistence on participation, like Kierkegaard’s outright revocation of the *Postscript*, indicates a failure in form on the part of the big book. Because AA seeks to turn propositions (“I should not drink” or “I will not drink”) into life the entire project is one of subjectivity. We can now easily imagine the founders of AA saying along with Kierkegaard: “When I had grasped this, it also became clear to me that, if I wanted to communicate anything on this point, the main thing was that my exposition be in the *indirect form*.”⁵⁴

What is it exactly in an AA meeting that fosters indirect and what exactly characterizes this indirect method? Kierkegaard frequently makes reference to Socrates and questions of ability. In the Socratic dialogues one often gets the impression that Socrates, knowing the “answer” beforehand, uses a series of questions which serve to draw the answer out of the pupil rather than offering it upfront, immediately and objectively. In this way AA teaches not that “sobriety for the (general) alcoholic is possible” but that

⁵² W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 374.

⁵³ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 396.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 203.

sobriety is possible for each specific individual at the meeting, and in their communion each attests to each other's potentiality. But here it seems more work is needed to best explicate the nature of indirect communication and certainly to understand its usage within AA.

So in no way do I presume to have exhausted the possibilities of reading recovery literature, and specifically that of 12 Step programs, in the light of critical theorists. However, it seems clear to me that in the age of discipline, our instincts about recovery tend to follow panoptical lines and engage questions about the best ways in which to distribute power throughout institutions such as schools, prisons, hospitals and psychiatric wards. One might couple the relative success of AA with an analysis of it as an existentially empowering model for the indirect communication of ability or behavior, and specifically that of making a continuous internal commitment to sobriety by hearing and responding to the call of conscience, with all of that term's Heideggerian implications. This coupling could prompt a more sociological or even policy-oriented inquiry into whether or not, and then how, this model for what Foucault might call "managing abnormality" can or should be implemented with regard to other social ills. Such work, on extrapolating from the fact that "for a guy who has spent years in jails, hospitals, psychiatric wards... there was only one answer—Alcoholic Anonymous,"⁵⁵ constitutes a more logistical and perhaps even political endeavor. As such, it resides well outside the scope of this paper.

A more relevant insofar as specifically philosophical project would involve making a claim about the alcoholic figure's ability to exemplify a more general human condition. After all, Heidegger and Kierkegaard write sweepingly on the human agent's constitution

⁵⁵ W., Bill, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 500.

and structure; at least to the extent that they are read as existentialists, their work speaks to our condition as radically (often despairingly) free and responsible for our own values, principles and ultimately actions. However, and risking here a too passing or negligent reference to a difficult author, I would hesitate because I fear “it would be the exemplarity—remarkable and remarking—that allows one to read in a more dazzling, intense, or even *traumatic* manner the truth of a universal necessity.”⁵⁶ Derrida finds this punningly traumatic insofar as he literally describes political violence against himself while at the same time worrying about the injustice involved in positing any human exemplar of a universal. In fact, I suspect this concern is born of Foucault’s suspicion regarding discipline: that it generates abnormal people where there had been none before. So if this paper intends to suggest that AA follows an existential-religious (not disciplinary) pattern, then positioning the alcoholic as especially or indeed traumatically indicative of the universal also renders her abnormal. As such, along with Derrida, I have passed over the question: “How do we interpret the history of an example that allows the re-inscription of the structure of a universal law upon the body of an irreplaceable singularity in order to render it thus remarkable?”⁵⁷ But perhaps such a claim to exemplification need not be violent, or can be drawn out with awareness, in the same way Derrida cautiously posits the Franco-Maghrebian as exemplary of a language’s inevitable and universal status as “my only” yet “not mine at all.”

⁵⁶ Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 26.

⁵⁷ Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism*, p. 26.