

# The Symbolism of Evil in the Big Book of AA

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## Abstract

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) describes itself as a “fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2010). The fellowship has millions of members all around the world and the number of independent AA groups is counted in tens of thousands. In this article, I try to understand the recovery from alcoholism in the fellowship of AA as a meaning giving process where the alcoholic is invited to interpret the founding text of AA, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How More Than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, and to appropriate the world that it opens in front of him. I focus on interpreting the symbolic language with which the Big Book of AA speaks of evil. I also explain how this symbolic language is related to recovery – i.e., how the alcoholic may find in the pages of the Big Book commonly shared symbols of stain, sin, and guilt which express his blind experience of evil.

## Keywords

hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, symbolism, evil, Alcoholics Anonymous, recovery

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is best described as both a fellowship of alcoholics and a program of recovery from alcoholism (Kurtz, 1979). As a social organization, AA exists in and through local meetings and the interpersonal relationships between members. It charges no dues or fees from members, and keeps no membership lists. The only membership requirement is a desire to stop drinking.

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AA's program for recovery is outlined in the famous Twelve Steps and it is basically a set of spiritual concepts and practices that have the purpose not of curing alcoholism, but of transforming the alcoholic. AA sees alcoholism as an incurable and progressive disease of the body, mind, and spirit, but the fellowship and program focus mainly on the spiritual aspect.

The fellowship's understanding of alcoholism and recovery was first put to words in a coherent manner in a book titled *Alcoholics Anonymous – The Story of How More Than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (1939). The book is also known as the “Big Book of AA” and it is the basic text of AA in that it gives an account of the experiences of the original members of the fellowship concerning alcoholism and recovery. In the book, the founders try to interpret their experiences, put them into words, and thus make them understandable for themselves and their readers. The purpose of the book is presented in the first lines of the foreword to its first edition as follows:

We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics *precisely how we have recovered* is the main purpose of this book. For them, we hope these pages will prove so convincing that no further authentication will be necessary. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. vii)

The Big Book has been read and used by millions of alcoholics since its publication. It is usually the first piece of literature a newcomer is given. Also, the text itself and other texts that focus on interpreting and clarifying the ideas presented in the Big Book are regularly read in AA meetings. The Big Book sets a kind of a standard for “good recovery” (Mercadante, 1996, p. 12).

In this article, I try to support the claim that recovery in AA is, in a very significant way, a hermeneutical process of meaning giving. It starts with the first step of the recovery program where the alcoholic admits to being powerless over alcohol, that is, interprets his or her situation according to the meaning of the step. Then, as s/he proceeds in the program, the alcoholic learns to see his or her situation in regard with alcohol, himself or herself, other people and God in a new light.

The Big Book supports this process by inviting the reader to interpret its text and to appropriate the world that it opens in front of the reader. The text uses various discursive procedures such as symbols, metaphors, and narration to show the world in a new light. One can even say that the text forces its reader to a hermeneutical process of interpretation, because metaphors and symbols, for example, are such structures of signification that can be understood only in and through interpretation.

I will support my claim using the conceptual and interpretive tools provided by Paul Ricoeur's theory of interpretation (Ricoeur, 1976, 1981). Ricoeur's theory of interpretation can help us understand recovery in AA for several reasons. Firstly, Ricoeur's theory helps us understand what interpretation is – and it does this in a way that is fruitful when we try to understand what role the Big Book plays in recovery. Secondly, the theory shows how figurative language is used in order to create new meanings. Thirdly, it gives us means for interpreting this figurative language.

I will demonstrate my claim by interpreting the symbolic language with which the Big Book of AA speaks of evil. One part of recovery has to do with dealing with the evil suffered and done by the alcoholic. The question concerning the alcoholic's guilt and responsibility has to be resolved by positing and articulating evil so that s/he can relate to it and its role in the world and in him or her.

I will show how the alcoholic learns to see his or her obsession as a symptom of a spiritual malady, of pride, arrogance, and hubris through interpreting the symbolically rich text of the Big Book. This symbolism of evil gives meaning to the alcoholic's experience of evil. In addition, one can even claim that the symbolism of evil of the Big Book has a certain liberating power.

### **The Big Book Shows the World in a New Light**

According to Paul Ricoeur, when discourse is fixed by writing, something important occurs in regard with the reference of the discourse (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 34-37, 94; Ricoeur, 1981, p. 215). In spoken discourse, the interlocutors can anchor the discourse to the surrounding reality by for example ostensive indicators and definite descriptions. But the final referent of a text is, in Ricoeur's words, "non-ostensive." In a text, discourse exceeds the mere ostensive designation of the situation common to the interlocutors in the dialogical situation. The text does not point to the concrete world but to a world of its own. The text speaks about a possible world and about different ways to orient within that world. It refers to different world-propositions and discloses a new way of being.

The text constructs a world of its own and in doing so it also shows reality in a new light. Ricoeur says that the text represents the world in a way that is not a mere shadow image of reality (Pellauer, 2007, p. 69; Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 40-41). He speaks of the text's way of representation as "iconic augmentation" and uses the invention of oil painting by Dutch painters as an analogy to describe what he means. Oil painting enhances the contrasts, gives colors back their resonance and lets the luminosity within which things shine appear. It gave the painters a new optic alphabet with which they could write a new text of reality.

Painting for the Dutch masters was neither the production nor the reproduction of the world but its metamorphosis. In Ricoeur's words, "the inscription of discourse is the transcription of the world, and transcription is not reduplication, but metamorphosis" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 42). The idea of iconic augmentation points to how this metamorphosis is achieved by enhancing certain features of the universe so that the world can be seen in a new light (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 41-42). Iconicity means the revelation of a real more real than ordinary reality. Iconicity is the re-writing of the world and writing is a particular case of iconicity.

Texts metamorphose or re-write the world by using various discursive procedures such as metaphors, symbols, and narration. Metaphor, for example, is a deviant usage of predicates in the framework of the sentence as a whole (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 50). A metaphorical statement invites us to make an interpretation where we see something *as* (Ricoeur, 2008, pp. 168-169), e.g., alcoholism *as* an illness. Symbols, in turn, are structures of signification in which a literal meaning designates another meaning which is figurative and which can be apprehended only

through the first (Ricoeur, 1974, pp. 12-13; Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 53-54). Symbols, too, show us something *as*. In religious language, for example, the word “stain” is sometimes used to describe a situation where someone's relationship with the sacred is in some way “stained” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 15).

As said, a text constructs a world of its own. The reader's task is then to open that world. According to Ricoeur, the meaning of the discourse fixed by writing has to be actualized in reading (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 91-92). In understanding the text, we “follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says, to what it talks about” (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 87-88). The final object of interpretation is the world that the text opens in front of itself. What must be interpreted in a text is “a proposed world that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own most possibilities” (Ricoeur, 2008, p. 83).

We can now state that AA's Big Book is a text that constructs a world of its own by using various discursive procedures. The Big Book portrays a unique conception of what alcoholism and recovery are. In order to understand what the Big Book says and what it talks about when it talks about alcoholism and recovery, we, as readers, have to answer the challenge that the text sets to us. We need to open the world of the Big Book by trying to “follow the path of thought opened up by the text” and place ourselves “en route towards the orient of the text” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 162).

This need for interpretation applies for every reader of the text. In this sense, every reader of the Big Book takes part in a process of interpreting the text which is similar to the one that a recovering alcoholic goes through. Even if we are not alcoholics we can, after interpreting the text, say: “I understand what it means to be in the world in the manner presented here” (Klemm, 1983, p. 144).

But the recovering alcoholic in AA, may go a bit further and aim to appropriate the world of the Big Book. In appropriation, an imagined possible mode of being is made actual. That is to say, the recovering alcoholic may recognize the world of the text of the Big Book as his or her own and become what s/he truly is through that recognition (Klemm, 1983, p. 144).

### **Interpreting The Symbolism of Evil**

Sin, lack of moral sense, behavior disorder, illness, mental illness – these are some conceptions in which alcoholism has been understood in the course of history (e.g., Fingarette, 1989; Kurtz, 2008, pp. 91-108; Mercadante, 1996; Stolberg, 2006; Tiebout 1999, pp. 5-12; Vaillant 1983, pp. 15-44; White, 1998, 2000). They all include in somewhat unspecified ways the idea that the alcoholic is abnormal, deviant, sick – or even evil. Not surprisingly, then, also the alcoholic may experience feelings of shame, worthlessness, guilt, or even fear and dread.

A significant part of recovery has to do with the way evil is posited in regard with alcoholism and the alcoholic. Is the alcoholic, for example, an innocent victim of a disease or is s/he to be held responsible for the condition? The question concerning the alcoholic's guilt and responsibility has to be resolved by positing and articulating evil so that s/he can relate to it and its role in the world and in him or her.

I will next try to interpret how the Big Book of AA gives meaning to the problem of evil associated with alcoholism. In the interpretation, I will apply Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the symbols of evil – stain, sin, and guilt – that are commonly shared in the western world. Ricoeur presented his analysis in the book *The Symbolism of Evil* (1969).

Ricoeur argues that evil becomes evil only when the possibility of confessing it arises to human consciousness (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 289; Simms, 2003, p. 21). Evil is always acknowledged and confessed through language. In fact, there is no direct, non-symbolic language of evil undergone, suffered, or committed. Whether a man<sup>1</sup> admits his responsibility or claims to be the prey of the evil taking hold of him, he does so first and foremost in a symbolism of evil. Evil is known through its symbols, because such symbols – e.g., stain, sin, and guilt – provide the material out of which confession is to be constructed.

For Ricoeur, a symbol is “any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first” (Ricoeur, 1974, pp. 12-13). Symbols are, in a sense, two-dimensional; they have a linguistic or semantic side and a non-semantic side.

In relation with the linguistic side of the symbol, we can talk about double-meaning or first order meaning and second order meaning (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 15; Ricoeur, 1974, pp. 12-13; Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 53-54). In addition to the primary, direct or literal meaning, there is a secondary meaning that is hidden and can be understood only through the first meaning. The primary meaning produces the secondary meaning, as the meaning of the meaning. Interpretation of a symbol is the work of thought that consist in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied by the literal meaning. For example, the word “stain” means primarily “defilement” or “unclean” etc. (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 15). But symbolically this literal and manifest sense points beyond itself to something that is like a stain or a spot.

The non-semantic side of the symbol has to do with the fact that the linguistic element of the symbol points always to something non-linguistic (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 289; Ricoeur, 1976, p. 54). Psychoanalysis, for example, connects its symbols to hidden psychic conflicts and the history of religion sees in symbols a milieu of the manifestations of the sacred (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 54). In religious language, for example, “stain” might point to someone whose situation in regard with the sacred is in some ways defiled or unclean.

Symbols demand to be interpreted. Because they are equivocal, symbols and the structures of signification that are associated with them work only when their structure has been explicated. For any symbolism to work, a minimal hermeneutics is required (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 62-63).

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<sup>1</sup> In the following sections where I read Paul Ricoeur's texts and the text of the Big Book I will use the gender-specific pronoun “man” in order to be faithful to the original texts. AA's Big Book, for example, refers to alcoholics as “men” even though it acknowledges that women, too, can be alcoholics.

## Stain

According to Ricoeur, the language of confession is counterpart of the experience it brings to light (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 7-8). Since the experience of evil is complex, the language in which it is expressed is also complex. Ricoeur finds in the symbolism of evil three layers that intertwine with each other but can still be analytically separated according to how they posit evil in respect with the subject of this experience.

The first, most archaic layer of the experience of evil is spoken of in the language of “stain” or “defilement” (Pellauer, 2007, p. 36; Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 25-26). Ricoeur defines defilement as “an act that evolves an evil, an impurity, a fluid, a mysterious and harmful something that acts dynamically – that is to say magically” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 25). The idea of defilement includes the notion of a stain or blemish that infects from without. Defilement is not a stain, but like a stain. It is a symbolic stain. It is an idea of a quasi-material something that is harmful through its invisible properties and works in the manner of a force in the field of our undivided psychic and corporeal existence.

The symbolism of stain is archaic and narrow in the sense that, at this stage, evil and misfortune are still quite the same (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 27). Evil and misfortune, doing ill and faring ill – suffering, sickness, death, failure - are not yet distinguished from each other. All possible sufferings, all diseases, all death, all failure are transformed into a sign of defilement.

This misfortune and suffering is interpreted as a punishment or a revenge (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 29-30, 41). Suffering is a punishment for the violation of an interdict or order. Suffering is the price that has to be paid for the violation, to “satisfy” the claim of purity for revenge. This primordial idea of defilement connected to supernatural vengeance is felt subjectively as primitive dread. “Man enters into the ethical world through fear and not through love” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 30), as Ricoeur puts it. Also, this dread is something more than fear of death or suffering. It is existential dread, or dread in the face of a threat which aims at a diminution of existence, a loss of the personal core of one's being.

The dread associated with defilement is difficult to put into words, but it still needs to be expressed. Defilement enters into the universe of man through speech, or the word, its anguish is communicated through speech. Also, the opposition of the pure and the impure is spoken. “A stain is a stain because it is there, mute; the impure is taught in the words that institute the taboo,” says Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 36).

The opposition of the pure and the impure raises the question of purification (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 35). Defilement is a symbol of evil, so it has to be dealt with symbolically. The ablution is a symbolic washing of the stain. But it is not produced in any total and direct action, it is always signified in partial, substituted and abbreviated signs. We speak of burning, removing, chasing, throwing, spitting out, covering up, and burying the evil. These are symbolic acts that stand for a total action addressed to the person taken as an undivided whole.

The opposition between the pure and the impure is also social in nature (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 36, 39). A man is defiled in the sight of certain men and in the language of certain men. Those who

have violated the order are removed from contact with their fellow citizens and excluded from public and sacred spaces.

I noted previously that the dread and the opposition between the pure and the impure need to be expressed in words. Ricoeur says that this dread also makes the defiled person conscious of himself (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 41). Consciousness discovers the unlimited perspective of self-interrogation. Man starts to ask questions like: "What sin have I committed in order to experience this failure, sickness or misfortune?" The meaning of the stain needs to be acknowledged and confessed.

Even though the confession of the stain is partly magical in nature, and a symbolic washing, the dread put into words also has an ethical quality (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 41-42). It is not only and simply a cry; it is also an avowal. As such, it involves a demand for a just punishment. Man wants a just retribution. If a man sins and is punished, we really think he should be punished as he has sinned.

Retribution and punishment, when just, also bring back order (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 43-44). And true punishment is that which restores order and through this produces happiness. To suffer punishment and pay the penalty for one's faults is the only way to be happy. What is aimed at in vengeance and punishment is expiation. Punishment is given in order to take away defilement. Order is affirmed both outside of the guilty person and within him too. Vengeance and expiation aim at amendment, the restoration of the personal worth of the guilty person through just punishment.

### **Stain in the Big Book**

In the text of the Big Book of AA one can find a layer where alcohol and alcoholism are spoken of as magical powers that infect the alcoholic from without. Recovery is said to start when the alcoholic admits to being "powerless over alcohol" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 71). The alcoholic feels he is ill in a mystical way that is inexplicable to himself, those near to him and even to the doctors that are treating him (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 6, 17, 3, 37, 42).

The Big Book presents alcohol as a substance that has the properties of a magical evil force. First, the alcoholic is absolutely powerless and defenseless against the first drink (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 24, 43). He feels that alcohol has taken his will power away in some obscure way: "Our human resources as marshalled by the will, were not sufficient; they failed utterly. Lack of power, that was our dilemma" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 57).

Second, alcohol as a power is almost a demonic - "cunning, baffling, powerful" - force (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 70-71). Chapter 11 has a telling description of the alcoholic's experience of this power: "As we became subjects of King Alcohol, shivering denizens of his mad realm, the chilling vapor that is loneliness settled down" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 165). One of the founders of AA, Bill, recalls the experience of this force in the following words: "I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 17).

The powerlessness that the alcoholic feels when confronted by the demonic power of alcohol evokes an indescribable dread in him. Bill again: “No words can describe the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 8). Moreover, this dread gets even apocalyptic tones in the Big Book: “...then would come oblivion and the awful awakening to face the hideous Four Horsemen - Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, Despair” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 165).

The similarities between a stain that inflicts a material substance, a disease inflicted in a human being and symbolical defilement are also noteworthy here. The Big Book portrays alcoholism as a disease that is a kind of curse inflicted upon the alcoholic. The other founder of AA, Dr. Bob, for example, speaks of recovery as release from a curse: “It is a most wonderful blessing to be relieved of the terrible curse with which I was afflicted” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 192). Also, this curse is seen to be some kind of a punishment: “To be *doomed* to an alcoholic death or to live on a spiritual basis are not always easy alternatives to face” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 56; italics mine).

I noted earlier that the opposition between the pure and impure is communicated through words. The Big Book makes a clear distinction between those drinkers who are *true* alcoholics and those who are not. The true alcoholic is someone who cannot take even one drink without grave, often fatal, consequences: “...once he takes any alcohol whatever into his system, something happens, both in the bodily and mental sense, which makes it virtually impossible for him to stop” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 33). Alcohol is portrayed as a kind of taboo and the line is crystal clear: “These allergic types can never safely use alcohol in any form at all” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 4).

The opposition between the pure and the impure is also social in nature and, not surprisingly, alcoholics evoke strong feelings of disgust and hatred in their fellow men. The alcoholic is maybe not totally excluded from the community, but he is bound to withdraw from social interaction gradually: “The less people tolerated us, the more we withdrew from society, from life itself” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 165). In the last stages of this social exclusion the alcoholic is shut out of all normal social interaction and lives in “health resorts, sanitariums, hospitals and jails” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 120) - if he manages to avoid the lonely destiny of an alcoholic death.

So, the condition of the alcoholic is in part spoken of in the symbolic language of defilement. This language also applies for recovery. For example, as the alcoholic is confronted by the demonic power of alcohol, it is logical that he should turn to an even higher power, that is, God, in his need for help. The Big Book states that the alcoholic is beyond human help and that “His defense must come from a higher Power” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 55).

Now, the obverse of the symbols of stain and defilement are such symbols as ablution and purification. In the Big Book recovery is spoken of symbolically in these terms. For example, in order to recover the alcoholic has to “clean house,” that is, confess his wrongdoings, ask for forgiveness, and repair the damage done (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 95, 111). God is asked in the sixth step of the recovery program to “remove from us all the things which we have admitted are objectionable” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 76). Also, “the alcoholic problem”

is something that will, during the recovery process, be “removed” or “taken away” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 69).

I noted earlier that punishment aims at restoring order and taking away defilement. In the light of this it is natural that the recovery program includes steps for restoring order such as the amendments of the steps eight and nine. The Big Book also makes an explicit connection between the restoration of the outer order with that of the inner state of the recovering alcoholic. His personal worth, self-esteem and social standing are restored as he goes on with his “housecleaning”: “We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. (...) We will comprehend the word serenity and will know peace. (...) That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 96).

## Sin

According to Paul Ricoeur, there is a divergence in meaning between defilement and sin, and this confusion is inscribed in the reality of the feelings and representations of evil (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 47-50). The representations of sin and defilement contaminate one another sometimes to the point of becoming indistinguishable. For example, the assault of demonic forces is often experienced as the counterpart of the absence of the god. In any case, the category that determines the usage of the notion of “sin” is that of “before” God. Sin is also a dimension of the penitent's existence which opens up new possibilities for the examination of conscience and the interrogative thinking that goes with it.

Sin is foremost a fault before the eyes of God (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 50–51). This implies the idea of an anthropotropic god, a god who is essentially turned toward man. Man finds himself implicated in the initiative taken by someone who is concerned about him. The experience of sin is found in a dialogical relationship, in the exchange between vocation and invocation (Pellauer, 2007, pp. 36-37; Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 50-52). The situation is centered in the word, in an utterance of God and an utterance of man. Sin is a violation of the Covenant, of a personal bond. The holy will is expressed in laws, commandments and other utterances and the “knowledge” of sin is in proportion to these utterances.

The demand that God addresses to human beings is an infinite one and this creates an unfathomable distance and distress between God and man (Pellauer, 2007, pp. 36-37; Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 55-56, 59). The consciousness of sin is also intensified by a tension between attempting to obey specific, finite commandments, and this infinite demand. The law expounds on how a person may be a sinner (through idolatry, filial disrespect, etc.), not that he or she already is one. This introduces a new tone to the feeling of the experience of evil, one of anxiety rather than terror or dread. This sense of anxiety is further intensified with the symbol of (a day of) judgment.

Sin is a violation of the bond between man and God (Pellauer, 2007, pp. 36-37; Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 69, 72). Man does not listen and he revolts; God is jealous and angry. Man is filled with pride and arrogance even though God is omnipotent. God gives the law that man breaks. Sin is a loss of a personal or communal relationship, but the idea of a broken relationship also includes the possibility of repairing that relationship, the possibility of redemption, pardon, and return. A

broken bond is still a relation and, in the movement of invocation, the sinner becomes fully the subject of sin.

Sin also includes negative notions of missing the mark, rebellion, deviation, straying from the path, and even being abandoned by God (Pellauer, 2007, pp. 36-37; Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 79-81). The counterpoint of these is the possibility of seeking God, returning and being pardoned.

But sin is not solely negative but also something positive (Pellauer, 2007, p. 37; Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 81-86). Sin is experienced as something real. Sin is something within the absolute sight of God and the consciousness of sin raises a need in the sinner to see the truth of his situation, to see the situation as seen by God. This seeing gives rise to self-awareness, to the question of the meaning of acts and motives. As such, sin is something that people can repent.

As a positive force sin is also something “in which” man is caught (Pellauer, 2007, p. 37; Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 87-93). Evil is something that captivates, binds, and possesses. The obverse of these symbols is liberation. The man held by sin is a man to be delivered, saved, bought back.

### **Sin in the Big Book**

In the Big Book, alcoholism is portrayed as an inexplicable and fatal illness that inflicts its victim in a magical way. From the viewpoint of the symbolism of evil it is interesting to see how the text connects the idea of a curse-like illness to the notion of sin. The Big Book presents the alcoholic's drinking as a sign of deeper problems. The movement from stain to sin starts with the following words: “Our liquor was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 76).

What are these “causes and conditions?” The text says that the alcoholic's failure is caused by “self, manifested in various ways” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 76). The alcoholic is self-centered and this egocentrism manifests itself commonly in such “character defects” as resentment, anger, selfishness, dishonesty, and fear. This self-centeredness is sin because it blocks the alcoholic off from God. I noted earlier that sin is foremost a violation of a personal bond. The Big Book says that the alcoholic in his pride and arrogance puts himself in the place of God: “First of all, we had to quit playing God” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 75).

The alcoholic's drinking is a symptom of egocentrism, of arrogant disregard of God's will. A counterpoint, and as such, a condition for recovery, is humility before God. The recovery program suggests (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 71-72) that the alcoholic should turn his will and his life over to the care of God (Step 3). He is also advised to humbly ask God to remove his shortcomings (Step 7). Moreover, he should seek through prayer and meditation to improve his conscious contact with God and pray for knowledge of His will for him and the power to carry that out (Step 11).

Interestingly, the Big Book suggests that it is God's will that the alcoholic should follow the recovery program. The text says that God can and will relieve the alcoholic of his illness if sought. How one can find God is, according to the authors, the main object of the Big Book and the recovery program (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 57). Also, those who do not recover are

“people who cannot completely give themselves to this simple program” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 70). The implication is clear. God wants to relieve the alcoholic if he follows the “God-given program” (Kurtz, 1979, p. 187).

Whereas ideas of pride and arrogance point to something active and thus powerful, the alcoholics of the Big Book also speak of experiences of being lost and having gone astray. These symbols envisage a total situation, a state of being astray or lost, a state of alienation or dereliction (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 73). The authors of the Big Book speak of their experience of the illness in similar terms. With the first step, the alcoholic admits to be powerless over alcohol and that his life has become unmanageable (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 71). He has lost “all the things worth while in life” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 28) and lives only to drink. Correspondingly, recovery means taking steps in a new direction, trudging “the Road of Happy Destiny” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 179). Recovery is rediscovering life by seeking God (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 167).

I noted earlier that sin is also something in which man is caught, something that binds. The idea of sin as a binding force is clearly expressed in the so called third-step prayer where the notion of sin as self-centeredness is combined with the idea of someone captive of sin: “God, I offer myself to Thee – to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. *Relieve me of the bondage of self*, that I may better do Thy will” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 75, italics mine). The symbolism of delivery is thus strongly related to recovery in the Big Book. In the strategically significant “three pertinent ideas” recovery is expressly spoken of as relief. God will relieve alcoholism if sought (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 72).

The symbols of stain and sin diverge in an interesting way when the Big Book speaks of recovery. Recovery from the alcoholic illness is seen as a removing, rooting or taking away of sins or shortcomings but also as relief from the bondage of self and taking steps on a path towards a new vision and way of life.

## **Guilt**

According to Paul Ricoeur, “guilt” refers to a radically individualized and interiorized experience of the unworthiness at the core of one's personal being (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 7). Whereas “stain” and “sin” are objective in a way, guilt is the subjective awareness of the guilty man of his situation (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 100-101).

The guilty consciousness confesses its guiltiness in a personal, internalized way (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 101-107). Personal guilt arises the “I” that accuses itself by asking: “What is it that I have done?” The guilty consciousness feels the burden of evil and becomes the measure of evil. Guilt also has degrees. While sin is a qualitative situation – it is or it is not – guilt designates an intensive quantity, capable of more and less. While a man is radically and entirely a sinner, he is more or less guilty.

Within a scale of offences, a scale of penalties is conceivable, too (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 108-118). The metaphor of the tribunal is connected with the registers of the consciousness of guilt.

Questions about which law has been broken and the true responsibility of the offender arise. The degree of guilt and the corresponding penalties are taken into consideration.

A guilty consciousness can also be a delicate and scrupulous consciousness (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 118-138). Ricoeur says that scrupulousness is the advanced point of guilt in that it carries to the extreme both the personal imputation of evil and the polarity of the just man and the wicked man. Scrupulousness is a thoroughgoing and voluntary heteronomy, and Pharisaism is an example of this mode of consciousness. To the Pharisees, the Torah is revelation and the revelation is Torah. With scrupulousness we also get the idea of merit – the idea that the worth of a man issues from the worth of his acts. But Pharisaism shows also the limit of this kind of religious scruple. Here, the God-man relation is confined to a practical relation of a will that commands and a will that obeys (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 133).

Guilt can also become a curse and a hell of its own (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 139-143). This is because man is powerless to satisfy all the demands of the law. Man will never be justified by the law because perfection is infinite and the commandments are unlimited in number. Self-righteousness, or the attempt to reduce sin by observance, becomes sin itself. This is the Pauline “curse of law” (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 140, 142).

Most important in the symbolism of guilt, however, is that what is in question now is someone who is at the same time both captive of evil and responsible for it. Ricoeur recapitulates this experience and his analysis of the primary symbols of evil in the concept of the servile will (Ricoeur, 1969, pp. 151-152.). This concept, however, is not directly accessible. If one tries to give it an object, it destroys itself, for it short-circuits the idea of a free will and the idea of servitude. Even though the concept of the servile will is inaccessible directly, it can be – and is – spoken of indirectly with the primary symbols of evil: guilt, sin and stain. These symbols intertwine so that even guilt cannot, in fact, express itself except in the language of “captivity” and “infection” inherited from the two prior stages of sin and defilement.

### **Guilt in the Big Book**

The theme of the guilty consciousness revolves in the Big Book around the “moral inventory” of the fourth step and the confession of sins of the fifth step of the recovery program. The program suggests that (we) alcoholics should first do a “searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves” and then admit “to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 71).

The idea of the moral inventory is to take an objective look, a God's gaze, at one's deeds. The Big Book compares this to a commercial inventory that a business takes (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 76-80). It is a “fact-finding and fact-facing process,” an “effort to discover the truth about the stock-in-trade.” It should be a “searching” and “fearless” look at one's life. First, the alcoholic is advised to look at all those cases where his self-esteem, pocketbook, ambitions, and personal relationships have been hurt. He should also take a look at his own mistakes: “Where had we been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking and frightened?” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 79).

The moral inventory is a thoroughgoing account of how the sinfulness of the alcoholic, that is his self-centeredness, manifests itself concretely in his life. The idea of the objective truth becomes the idea of the self-accusing consciousness that tries to measure its own guilt and responsibility. "Where were we to blame?," the alcoholics are urged to ask and also to list their faults before them "in black and white" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 80).

This moral inventory is followed by the confession of the fifth step (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 84-85). This confession is first made to God, which accentuates the fact that the alcoholic is guilty before God. Confession is also made to another human being and the reasons for this seem to be pragmatic. Confession to another human being is a check against self-deception and it also teaches the alcoholic "humility, fearlessness and honesty" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 85).

Release from guilt is achieved through repentance, forgiveness, and mercy. The moral inventory and confession are followed in the recovery program by steps 6 and 7 where the alcoholic turns to God and humbly asks Him to remove his "defects of character" or "shortcomings," that is, asks for forgiveness and mercy (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 88-96). The amends of step eight and nine are made in order to ask for forgiveness from those that the alcoholic has harmed and also to repair the damage done.

The text says that the alcoholic will probably be forgiven by the ones he has harmed. It states with regard to the alcoholic's experience that: "In nine cases out of ten the unexpected happens. Sometimes the man we are calling upon admits his own fault; so feuds of years' standing melt away in an hour. (...) Our former enemies sometimes praise what we are doing and wish us well. Occasionally they will offer assistance" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 90).

With God, the alcoholic can rely on forgiveness and mercy. As mentioned earlier, the Big Book states that God will release the alcoholic of his alcoholism if sought (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 72). Release from alcoholism is interpreted also to be a sign of God's mercy and grace.

Regarding the theme of the guilty consciousness and particularly that of scrupulousness, it is interesting to note that according to the Big Book moral inventory, confession, repentance, asking for forgiveness, and making amends should continue on a daily basis after the process has been started (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 97-98). The tenth step of the recovery program suggests that the alcoholic should continue to take personal inventory and, when he is wrong, should promptly admit it. He should also pray for knowledge of God's will for him and the power to carry it out (Step 11) and practice the principles of the recovery program in all his affairs (Step 12). Alcohol is a subtle foe and the alcoholics get only "a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of" their "spiritual condition" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, pp. 97-98).

The Big Book seems to imply that the alcoholic is relieved of his condition through his actions, or works. This idea is also included in the conception that the alcoholic will recover by following the "God-given" 12-step recovery program. On the other hand, those who are bound to make the program itself a burden and a curse for themselves are advised against the sin of self-righteousness. Right after the presentation of the recovery program the Big Book teaches the right attitude for the program: "No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect

adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 72). (Concerning works and faith, see also Lobdell, 2004, pp. 203-237; Mercadante, 1996, p. 96.)

### **The Symbolism of Evil and Recovery**

Above, I have interpreted the symbolism of evil of the Big Book of AA. I have tried to decipher what the text says and what it talks about when it talks about the alcoholic's experience of evil by using such symbols as stain, sin and guilt. But what does all this have to do with the alcoholics of real life who may confront this symbolism on the pages of the Big Book or in AA meetings?

First, the text of the Big Book plays an important part in recovery in that it proposes to its reader a new mode of being and a new capacity for knowing himself or herself – a new way of seeing the world. According to Ricoeur “to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* towards the *orient* of the text” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 162). This kind of interpretation that complies with the injunction of the text, that follows the “arrow” of the sense of the text and tries to think accordingly, in turn, initiates a new self-understanding. Thus, when appropriating the text, the reader is “enlarged in his capacity of self-projection by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 94). According to Ricoeur, interpretation is “the process by which disclosure of new modes of being – or if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger – of new forms of life – gives to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 94).

Ricoeur here opposes the self, which proceeds from the understanding of the text, to the ego, which claims to precede it: “It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego” (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 94-95). The notoriously famous problem of the “hermeneutical circle” is stated on an ontological level instead of taking it to mean a subjectivistic coincidence of psyches or even the understanding of the intention of the author or the original readers of the text (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 92-94).

The text of the Big Book provides the alcoholic a new way of seeing the world and being in the world. It accomplishes this by using various discursive procedures such as the different symbols of evil that I have interpreted above. This symbolism of evil gives meaning to the alcoholic's blind, equivocal, and scandalous experience of evil that would shut up in itself without it (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 7). The recovering alcoholic finds on the pages of the Big Book commonly shared symbols of stain, sin, and guilt with which he or she can express the experience of evil associated with alcoholism.

The primary symbols of evil give a metamorphosed transcription of the world. The alcoholic of the Big Book is cursed by a magical illness, overwhelmed by the demonic power of alcohol. S/he has also fallen into sin. His or her relationship with God is arrogant and defiant; s/he has set himself in the place of God. S/he is also captive of his or her own ego which manifests itself, for example, as fear, resentment, selfishness, and dishonesty when the alcoholic unsuccessfully tries to live by self-propulsion.

On the other hand, the symbolism of the Big Book also tells what recovery or release from the evil power of alcoholism is. The alcoholic has to admit his or her powerlessness over alcohol, respect the taboo, and refrain from the first drink. S/he has to confess his sinfulness and guiltiness, repent, ask for forgiveness, and repair the damage done. Foremost, s/he needs to turn humbly to God and repair his or her relationship with Him.

Moreover, one can claim that the recognition and confession of evil liberates in itself. According to Ricoeur, evil and freedom are so closely linked that the two terms imply one another mutually (Ricoeur, 1974, pp. 431-432). When a person takes upon himself the origin of evil s/he lays aside the claim that evil is a thing, something observable in physical, psychic or social reality. When s/he says: "It is I who have acted," s/he asserts that there is no evil-being, there is only the evil-done-by-me. To take evil upon oneself is an act of language that imputes the evil act to oneself. This imputation posits in *me* the identity of the moral subject through past, present and future. I acknowledge that *I* could have acted and can act otherwise, freely.

In this sense, one can claim that the symbolism of evil of the Big Book has a certain liberating power. Even though the first, archaic symbol of stain posits evil to be a magical force that infects from without – alcoholism as a curse – the later, more advanced symbols of sin and guilt reveal this dialectic of evil and freedom.

The Big Book portrays alcoholism to be essentially alienation from the reality of self, others, and God (Kurtz, 1999, p. 216). In order to recover, the alcoholic may follow the path of thought opened up by the text and find a symbolism that gives him or her the capacity to see alcohol, himself or herself, others and God in a new light. S/he may receive from the text a new mode of being. S/he may confess his illness, sinfulness and guiltiness and start to take responsibility for his past, present and future life. In the symbolic words of the Big Book - s/he may "trust God and clean house" – and be "relieved of alcoholism."

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### **The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous**

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - 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 the care of 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 the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.