

**Alcohol, Virtue, and the Making of Persons in Contemporary America**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the members of Alcoholics Anonymous in Austin, Texas, past and present.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes how alcoholics undergo a moral transformation using Alcoholics Anonymous and other cultural resources. Based upon two years of field research among self-identified recovering alcoholics in Austin, Texas, I inquire into the central problem they faced while they were drinking, when they stopped, and while they were rebuilding their lives: the questions Who am I? and How should I live? Participant-observation in their recovery-related and day-to-day activities, analysis of face-to-face interactions, semi-structured interviews, and examination of diaries, letters, and emails reveal how their drinking selves were a set of relations between their bodies, alcohol, and material engagements with people and things in a social world. When they stopped drinking, they learned to identify certain relations as virtuous or vicious, and reconfigured their habitual ways of engaging with the world to embody virtues.

Alcohol's physical effects occur within self-interpreting beings with values and purposes. For people immersed in American self-help culture, alcohol is a tool for self-improvement and achieving social goals. Alcohol's effects – loosened muscles, lowered heart rate, euphoria – have any number of qualities. My informants picked up those relevant to their purposes. Those qualities became available as sign-vehicles that signified characteristics of social personae they aspired to be: an elegant tango dancer; a man with swagger; a good wife.

When people stopped drinking, they built a new basis for living by avoiding habits that signified vices, such as dishonesty, and adopting ones that signified virtues, such as honesty. They learned to make these evaluations from other recovering alcoholics. They did not follow rules or norms. They learned a mode of moral reasoning in which they formed relations of likeness between instances of behavior, both theirs' and others'. They learned to exercise virtue at the right time, to the right person, in the right way, for the right reasons. Their interpretations depended on frameworks that include mood and American notions of ethical conduct. My informants also rescaled how they experienced their minds. When distressed, their minds seemed

“big,” and they exploited the materiality of practices such as writing to make their minds seem “small.”

This work uses phenomenological and semiotic analysis to contribute to studies of personhood, ethics, and materiality. Studying addiction and recovery helps us understand the relationships between people and things in the world, the formation of disposition as an individual and social process, and modes of moral reasoning people use in changing their dispositions. An analysis that links physiological and meaning-making processes bridges an analytic gap between biology and culture.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Alcoholics do things that confound other people, and even themselves. That was the case with the self-identified recovering alcoholics I met in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in Austin, Texas. Here are some of those things they shared with me: receiving six DWIs, totaling two cars, sleeping with people they ordinarily would not have, being jailed for drunk and disorderly, dropping out of school, losing a job, losing a wife, losing retirement savings, and becoming hospitalized for health problems. Here are some commonly accepted explanations for why they do this: brain disease, genetic susceptibility, bad childhood, an alcoholic family, social pressures to drink, no self-control, irrationality, and weakness of will. Leaving aside for now the question of their veracity, these explanations exist and are debated due to an understanding that their behavior is extraordinary. Yet, despite the severity of their condition, the puzzle is that some manage to stop drinking, and in the words of people who know them, they become entirely different people.

For example, when he was drinking and using drugs, Chris said he was not nice to his kids, although he did not hit them. His relationship with them deteriorated to the point that when he called his daughter, she would answer the phone with “Oh. It’s you.” After he became sober, he and his children are very close and he plays an active role in his grandchildren’s lives. Evelyn’s daughter said that Evelyn used to live in the shadow of her husband, who had a strong, dynamic personality. After her husband’s death, and after she became sober, Evelyn wrote this about how she transformed: “I was part of a partnership with my husband for so many years that after he died, I didn’t feel like a whole person. I didn’t feel like ‘me’ anymore—I was kinda just this body walking, talking, & doing...but not me! Only with AA’s program have I begun to feel an identity!” Evan went from burning himself and throwing himself down stairs to becoming a writer with a loving partner, helping her care for her two children. Gabriel, who was a musician with the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle, who was incarcerated because of a violent felony, is now

prioritizing the pursuit of knowledge and the truth. These dramatic self-transformations intrigued me. How did they do it? Did they imagine a different self and a different life, and then step into and inhabit those imaginings? What exactly happened? This dissertation is an ethnography of their transformations.

When they talked about drinking, they talked about the pleasure of it. But equally, I heard the phrase “Alcohol was a crutch,” or variants of it. A crutch is something useful with a purpose – a tool – to help an injured person walk. But the way in which they used the phrase suggested it was an illegitimate tool. They apparently should have been doing something by themselves. It almost goes without saying that alcohol induces relaxation, eases emotional pain, loosens tongues, and causes other states that people desire. Based on how they talked about what they got out of drinking, the alcohol-induced changes in their brains were not isolable “highs.” They put those physical effects to meaningful purposes.

When I listened to the newly sober, they were concerned not only with lacking alcohol. They were undergoing an existential crisis. They asked bewildered questions such as, “Who am I?” or “What am I going to do?” Alcohol was apparently more than useful for fulfilling simple purposes; drinking was intertwined with their lives to a much greater extent. After hearing these questions, I did not expect the type of stories I heard as reports of progress in attaining sobriety. These stories typically involved miniscule everyday changes. They said things I expected, such as the greater role played by God in their lives, but I was struck by the significance of these quotidian concerns. One man shared excitedly that he did not throw his cell phone after an argument with his girlfriend, while a woman said she started to make sure she returned grocery carts to their proper location. Like drinking, these simple acts fulfilled more than a simple function.

Rebecca’s morning phone calls are another example. When she first stopped drinking, she spent a lot of time in her closet crying, wearing the same clothes for days. She had an AA sponsor. In Austin, people with a year or more of sobriety who has performed all the Twelve Steps are asked to volunteer to be a guide and mentor to others. Rebecca called her sponsor sobbing soon after she awoke. Her sponsor asked, without any greeting, Have you made your bed? She answered, No. She then heard a “click” as her sponsor hung up. After making her bed, she called back. Have you showered? No. Click. She called again. Have you prayed? No. Click. Her sponsor would not have a conversation until Rebecca had completed her hygiene routine,

eaten breakfast, and other things people typically do before starting a day of work. Rebecca said, “She was the most unloving woman I ever met!” Yet, the point was that Rebecca learn to be a responsible person, starting with the small tasks of caring for her bed and her body. Maggie’s first consciously sober action involved driving. She had been going to AA meetings, and heard people talking about how their ego interfered with sobriety. She examined her own behavior, and identified her aggressive reactions to other drivers as a problem. When someone cut her off in traffic, she would honk, yell, and flip them off. She drew a relationship of similarity between her behavior and the behaviors that other people described in meetings. She concluded that she was being egotistical because she was acting as if she were the most important person on the road. So she consistently strove to drive at the speed limit and maintain proper following distance. Rather becoming angry at other drivers, she told herself other things about them, that they simply made a mistake or were having a bad day, and so were not intentionally targeting her for disrespect. Rather than ego, she acted on the basis of understanding and tolerance toward others.

The above brief examples sketch out what a study of self-transformation needs to account for. That they asked “Who am I?” after they stopped drinking suggests they were a particular kind of person with a particular kind of life, which eventually fell apart. Alcohol was intertwined with the way they lived their lives. I took their description of alcohol as a useful tool seriously. This means not treating them as meaning-making subjects who merely attribute qualities and powers to a neutral object, alcohol. An analysis of this must consider their material engagements with alcohol: what the bodily changes it induced signified for them, and what these meaningful actions enabled them to do. That they were committed to a vision of the good life while they were drinking may partially explains why they continued to drink in the face of dire consequences.

At some point, they stopped drinking. It is not enough to rely on common sense to explain this, that they simply came to their senses and saw their situation for what it was: a drinking problem. This common sense assumes that drinking problems have a certain number of properties, and if a behavior shares those properties, one may conclude that it too is a drinking problem. However, *any* two things have some property in common; there are no two things that are not similar (Goodman 1972). It is more productive to consider the process by which their behavior came to be interpreted by them as a problem. Michel Foucault terms this process *problematization*: in his formulation, thought

allows one to step back from this way of acting or reaction, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem (1997, 117).

Thus, the questions that need to be answered are: In what circumstances did they detach themselves from their engagement with something in their world and take an evaluative stance on their own behavior? What ideologies of personhood, what moral systems provided the frameworks through which the properties of their behavior became definable? What factors affected the similarities drawn between behaviors?

When they stopped, they could not imagine a life without alcohol. What cultural systems of meaning were available to them for imagining such a life and a self without alcohol? The quotidian habits they changed signified qualities of kinds of persons. Numerous people said that when they drank after promising themselves they would not, the drink was preceded by the thought, "Fuck it." Taking a shower is not just a neutral process of removing excess sweat and skin oil. Rebecca learned to interpret not making a bed or showering as signifying "not caring," a quality not conducive to sobriety, while doing those things signifies "caring" about how she engages with her world. If she cares about that, she is more likely to care about consequences and stay sober. Picking out one of a number of qualities a thing has, drawing relations of similarities between that and another thing, and evaluating them as "right" or "wrong" or "better" or "worse" requires learning a particular mode of moral reasoning. Maggie's reasoning about her driving behavior was tied to context. She did not always show kindness or tolerance to others. In the driving example, she did it at the right time, to the right people, for the right reasons. Rebecca, Maggie, and others learned to enact virtues, such as responsibility and tolerance, that are associated with sobriety and avoid vices, like anger, that are associated with alcoholism. Finally, the process of self-transformation is material and intersubjective. It did not take place solely inside their heads. The transformation involved how they talked to people, ate food, and treated their belongings. They evaluated their actions with other people, and learned to see themselves through others' eyes. They did not foster autonomy, but dependence on other people and a Higher Power.

This work focuses on how mood and processes of signification shape habit (re)formation in the context of addiction and recovery in the United States. Studying the self-transformation by

which alcoholics stop drinking is a means for understanding relationships between people and things in the world. Examining those transformations sheds light on the formation of disposition as an individual and social process. It is a means by which to understand how people deliberate upon ethical matters and act ethically in ways that do not rely on rules and norms.

### *Fieldsite*

I conducted field research in Austin, Texas from 2011 to 2013 with self-identified recovering alcoholics. I wanted to work with people as they attempted to reform day to day habits. There are other treatment options for alcoholics in Austin. There are numerous rehabilitation centers and self-help alternatives to AA. Examples include Women for Sobriety, a feminist alternative; Rational Recovery, which makes no reference to God or a Higher Power; and Moderation Management, which does not require full abstinence. There is no cost to attend AA and it has the most name recognition of alcoholism self-help groups, having attracted considerable attention in popular culture since its founding in the 1930s. AA reported two million members in the United States in 2006, and membership in other 12-Step groups number in the hundreds of thousands (Travis 2009). I chose AA because it has numerous meetings throughout Austin and is well-attended, and therefore had the most number of potential study participants. It is very easy to find meetings open to the public because AA welcomes researchers and any interested outsider to open meetings. The only other researcher I encountered was a neuroscientist recruiting people for fMRI studies on the impact cocaine and methamphetamine had on the brain. Other outsiders I encountered were nursing students who were required to attend 12-Step meetings as part of their training. Sometimes, family members or friends of alcoholics attended with the person. Closed meetings are for alcoholics or people who think they may be. I shared my own stories related to the theme of the meeting, so people became acquainted with me as I became acquainted with them. I doubt I could have established rapport without doing this. I limited myself to meetings within a fifteen minute drive of my apartment. At one point in my fieldwork, an informant told me that 350 people were moving to Austin each day. Traffic did not allow me to range very far. Participants who went to meetings close to my apartment were also likely to live within a close drive, making observation of their lives easier. Fortunately, I lived in an area of Austin with a high density of AA meetings. To

protect the anonymity of my informants, I will not identify the meetings I attended or their location.

The stereotypical AA member is a straight, white, middle-class, Christian male. I sought people who did not fit this demographic stereotype, but because my research required disclosing potentially stigmatizing information, my main criteria for including participants were their willingness to work with me and whether we had rapport. I did not have trouble finding study participants; only one person refused. While Austin is a majority minority city, most AA participants I encountered were white. The majority of my informants were therefore white, but included an African American, a son of Mexican immigrants, and a biracial individual. While I tried to obtain a participant pool that included a variety of demographic categories, I did not try to find a sample representative of Austin or AA in Austin. I aimed for multiplicity in my sample to get an array of experiences. Participants included men and women. Three of my male primary informants were gay, and two others were bisexual. All but two of my informants moved to Austin from out of state through their employment. Gabriel was born and raised in a small town about a 45 minute drive outside of the city, and Alan came to the city as a child and was raised there. Maggie and Evan could be called hipsters drawn to the city's cultural scene, while Greg and Ian worked in the technology sector. Four moved to Austin from smaller towns in Texas. A little more than half of my primary informants had a college degree, and about that proportion came from white-collar families with at least one parent with a college degree. Most ethnographies on addiction focus on marginal populations. This may be partly due to ease of access to groups of addicts, but I chose participants who had jobs and a domicile to avoid possible stereotypes of down-and-out addicts.

Much scholarship on AA depicts an unproblematic adoption of an alcoholic identity. But AA is not a kind of Durkheimian collectivity with a uniform collective consciousness imposing norms upon members. In preliminary fieldwork, I encountered doubt and disagreement amongst newcomers far more than I encountered alignment with AA concepts, and so decided to examine cases in which the alignment process would encounter clearer obstacles. I sought primary informants who did not fit the stereotype of the devout Christian, instead describing themselves as "spiritual" or non-religious. Some meetings insist upon an AA orthodoxy. My informants called these "traditionalist" meetings, which I will describe in the next section and discuss further in Chapter 3. Rather than these meetings, I attended those at which people more openly

and frequently expressed criticisms and doubts, so that I could identify potential informants who were actively attempting to align with or reject AA concepts.

I primarily collected data through participant observation. I found a sponsor and did the Twelve Steps. I also spent time with people before and after meetings, and went to as many AA gatherings as I could, such as meals or parties. I also took part in non-AA parts of people's lives, visiting them at work, taking them on their errands, spending time with them in their homes, and going to their social gatherings. I recorded ongoing open-ended interviews on specific topics such as becoming an alcoholic, doing the Twelve Steps, and their day-to-day struggles. I examined written materials: journals, diaries, and written work produced as part of Twelve Step work. I had the most difficulty trying to observe sponsor-ponsee interactions. Often, one or both parties would hesitate because these are the interactions in which the most sensitive personal information is divulged. The few interactions I could observe and record are examined in Chapter 3. Transcriptions and quotes are from recorded interviews and interactions at which I was present except where noted. I eliminated most dysfluencies and repetitions for readability.

This dissertation is not an ethnography of AA as an organization, nor does it make claims on its efficacy. It is concerned with people who have used its concepts and practices to transform fundamental ways in which they engage with their world. It has worked for most of the people in this study. There are several who continue to drink alcoholically by their description, and others who primarily use other means to stay sober. One woman began to drink moderately again with no problems; I make no judgment on whether she was a "real" alcoholic or not. So far, I have been using the terms alcoholism and addiction without interrogating them. The dominant view among researchers, the treatment industry, and self-identified recovering addicts is what Courtwright (2010) calls the "National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) brain disease paradigm." In this view, addiction is a chronic relapsing brain disease characterized by compulsive drug-seeking and -taking, loss of control in regulating consumption, and negative affect when the drug is withheld (Feltenstein and See 2013, Kushner 2010, Reinarman 2005, Wise 2000). There are also the criteria listed within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association. Rather than follow any particular guidelines, I accepted participants' self-definition of themselves as addicts and alcoholics. I do not claim the knowledge and authority to decide who is and is not an addict. After spending time with alcoholics, I accept that as a group, they form different relationships with alcohol than non-

alcoholics. Against social constructionist views of addiction, I accept that there is a physiological component to addiction. When discussing historical events, I use the terms that were contemporary to those times, such as intemperance, drunkenness, or inebriation. I use the terms sobriety and recovery as references to sets of practices people use as means to abstain from alcohol and other substances.

### ***Alcoholics Anonymous: An American Story***

I will give a brief overview of how AA works to provide contextualizing information for ethnographic analyses to follow. I will be analyzing its practices in more detail in subsequent chapters. My informants' experiences in AA are quintessentially American experiences. Recovery culture is pervasive in the United States. Outside of 12-Step groups (versions of AA that address other addictions), there is a thriving recovery publishing industry that turns out memoirs, novels, and self-help books. There are live, televised, and web-streamed appearances by recovery specialists (Travis 2009). There have been a number of addiction reality television shows on cable networks, the longest running of which was A&E's *Intervention*, which began in 2005, aired 275 episodes, and won an Emmy Award. Addiction and recovery has been the subject of film for decades. Notable early films include *The Lost Weekend* (1944) and *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962). There have been dozens of films and TV shows since then featuring addiction and recovery. In terms of self-help more broadly, sales in that sector of the publishing industry increased from 1991 to 1996 by 96%. Books, seminars, audio and video products, and personal coaching geared toward self-improvement became a \$2.48 billion per year industry by the early 2000s. One-third to one-half of Americans have bought a self-help book in their lifetimes, and between 1972 and 2000, the number of self-help books more than doubled to 2.4% of total books in print (McGee 2005). Recovery, whether people use AA or some other therapeutic method, is an answer to alcoholics' existential suffering when they stop drinking. Recovery provides an answer to their question, "Who am I?" For an American, stopping drinking is an opportunity to remake himself. In other cultures without a historical valuation placed upon self-invention, AA may be a peculiar institution indeed.

Recovery culture is an expression of an historical American preoccupation with self-making. Late 18<sup>th</sup> century Americans had a communal reformed Protestant ethos (Shain 1994). Most ordinary people probably thought of themselves less as autonomous individuals than as

members of families, towns, and congregations. The individual self did not have the unambiguous moral legitimacy it has today. Their modes of self-making were familial-, religious-, and community-directed (Howe 1997). They lived in morally demanding agricultural communities defined by with family- and community-assisted self-regulation and self-denial. Self-interest and self-centeredness were considered personal pathologies. Reformed Protestantism stipulated that one avoid absorption with material well-being and self-interest, and that the individual needed suprapersonal assistance for salvation (Shain 1994). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a Lockean idea of private property began to predominate. As bourgeois white men were disentangled from family and status networks, they acquired property rights over themselves and also what they created through their labor. This personalized understanding of property made work and its products central to the meaning of modern individuals. While this was defined against women and people of color who were denied a public existence and did not own what their labor created, those groups fought to have that notion of property extended to themselves (McGee 2005, Wiebe 1995).

In 1701, Cotton Mather published a sermon that exhorted Christians to succeed in both their calling to serve Christ and in some useful secular employment in order to gain salvation in this life and the next. This was typical of Puritan clergy preaching that God approved of business callings and rewarded virtue with wealth. Benjamin Franklin was influenced by these teachings, and the virtues he promulgated in his success self-help book *Poor Richard's Almanack* influenced self-made men throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Wyllie 1954). Franklin's "plainness" was a challenge to hierarchy; his middle-class garb and plain speech implied he should be judged by his accomplishments, abilities, and character, and that individuals were not given a fixed identity at birth, but could create one for themselves (Cawelti 1965). The self-disciplinary practices in *Poor Richard* would eventually lead to good habits that would render the expression of virtue automatic (Howe 1997).

The rags to riches literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century built upon these values. The lesson was that anyone with the qualities of character necessary for success could succeed amidst American plenitude (Wyllie 1954). People in the 19<sup>th</sup> century valued character development, which they called "self-improvement." This entailed bettering oneself mentally, morally, and physically, and also using one's abilities to proper advantage. This was not limited to the middle class. People of all classes valued independence, self-discipline, and fully realizing their human powers.

Character was necessary for responsible political involvement, obtaining a worthy occupation, and attaining respectability in general. Opportunities for self-improvement were most numerous for white men, but other groups sought access through increasing education for blacks and whites, women and girls. A proliferation of newspapers, magazines, books, and lectures indicated a demand for resources for self-improvement (Howe 1997).

Another area of self-improvement was refinement, a type of self-making facilitated by consumption. Bushman (1992, 446) states that as gentility spread in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, “more than wealth or kind of work, manner and style of life divided people in their everyday exchanges with each other.” Clothing, cleanliness, and bodily comportment had to be transformed from earlier, looser standards. I will review changes in bodily comportment because it is related to how some informants used alcohol to alter how their bodies presented. The courtesy books encouraged self-discipline through having clean faces and hands and grease-free clothes. Particular attention was paid to mouths: one was not to yawn with the mouth open, chew with the mouth open, stuff food into the mouth so that the cheeks bulge out, breathe loudly, spit, or walk with the mouth open. Back and head were straight, chins up, and shoulders down and back. One was to keep this erect posture, but not to the point of stiffness. Truly genteel people did not loll or lounge, but artfully displayed ease of bearing, with bent elbows, hand on hip, and feet at an angle, for example. Dancing in particular showed bodily mastery.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, self-making came to be understood largely through psychology (McGee 2005, Rieff 1966). The degree to which psychotherapy has suffused throughout American culture is indicated by the following numbers. In the 1960s, about 14% of Americans had received some form of psychological counseling; by 1995, it was nearly half. Between 1970 and 1995, the number of mental health professionals quadrupled (Furedi 2004). Therapeutic frameworks are not limited to professionals. They may also be found in popular self-help books and groups, media representations of the psychological, and ideas that emerge when these professional and public arenas combine (Becker 2005). McGee (2005) posits that self-help literature appeals to contemporary Americans due to current conditions: the dismantling of social safety nets and lifelong marriage and work becoming anachronistic. In this context, one must work on oneself to ensure continued marriageability and employability. Nikolas Rose takes a Foucaultian approach that describes the formation of a regime that, while it does not produce uniform individuals, does produce a normativity of us as individuals inhabited by an inner

psychology and strives for self-realization, self-esteem, and self-fulfillment in everyday life (1998, 3). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychiatry, psychology, and related disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, demography, epidemiology, public health, comprised a regime that played a role in inculcating this sense of self through programs and policies to shape individuals not just to control, normalize, or reform people, but also to maximize their potential to be intelligent, productive, happy, virtuous, healthy, empowered, and enterprising (1989, 231).

This history gave rise to an American sense of self as material for individual self-making projects. AA is a thoroughly American invention that grew out of this history. Non-American scholars have commented upon the peculiar “American-ness” of AA (Kurtz 1979). I will give a more details on AA’s founding in Chapter 2. While it retains elements from the reformed Protestant ethos, it is an outgrowth of the long history of self-improvement. Its focus on character – that if one is humble, selfless, honest, and the like one can become sober – reflects longstanding American concerns. Its founding in the 1930s came after decades in which conditions such as madness and drunkenness were medicalized, and has thrived since as Americans gained interest in correcting psychological abnormalities and maximizing their potential. Whether its founders were aware of them or not, AA’s practices resembled those of nineteenth grassroots temperance movements to reform drunkards.

AA’s central text is the book titled *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, originally published in 1939. It is referred to as “the Big Book.” The first 164 pages explain the origin of AA and its conceptualization of alcoholism, and serve as the manual for its Twelve Step recovery program. The Twelve Steps are:

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.

Performing the Steps is called “working” the Steps. Many studies of AA focus on meetings, but the Steps are the core of its program and are worked outside of meetings with a sponsor. In Austin, sponsors are people with at least one year of sobriety who have themselves worked the Steps. They guide others through them and are a reliable source of support.

Step Twelve states the purpose of the Steps: to attain a spiritual awakening. AA is not a program for simply abstaining from alcohol. AA members refer to people who stop drinking and do no other work on themselves as “dry drunks.” In contrast, the terms recovery and sobriety imply some kind of transformation. Ernest Kurtz (1979) traces the Evangelical Pietist heritage of AA as seen in the Steps. The fellowship did not use overt religious or moralizing terms after Prohibition was repealed to avoid association with failed temperance crusaders; however, sobriety as conceptualized by AA is the equivalent of religious salvation. Step One affirmed the need for salvation, and Step Two, the possibility of salvation by a Power outside the self. Steps Three through Eleven lay out the activity by which salvation is obtained. The Steps also contain elements of liberal humanism, as this activity is human and freely undertaken. The combination of Pietism and humanism make AA a typically American religious phenomenon.

I met only one person, Jennifer, who readily took to the Steps. The concept of surrender in Step Three was distasteful for many. While AA is quintessentially American, the notion of personhood contained within its program—that alcoholics cannot save themselves, and must submit their wills to a Higher Power and depend on their fellows as they seek sobriety—run counter to other American notions of personhood that valorize individual autonomy and power. Jennifer enjoyed her first experience of Step Four, in which people name people or institutions they resent, the incident(s) that precipitated the resentment, and the role they played in creating the resentment. Most people found this painful, and were intimidated by the prospect of sharing the information with another. Step Nine, making amends to people they wronged, also filled

many with dread. Chapters Three and Four will analyze in more detail my informants' experiences in working the steps.

The Big Book and the Twelve Steps have been adapted to other addictions, both substance and behavioral. In other addiction fellowships, the word "alcohol" is replaced by, for example, gambling, food, or crystal meth, and "alcoholics" with compulsive gamblers, compulsive overeaters, and crystal meth addicts, respectively. Marijuana Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous have their own books. The steps have been used since the 1950s in Al-Anon Family Groups, the group for friends and relatives of alcoholics initially founded by Lois Wilson, Bill Wilson's wife, for the wives of alcoholics in AA. I have heard on numerous occasions that even "normal" people could benefit from the Twelve Steps. I went through the Twelve Steps as a participant observer, and while I do not report the content of my Twelve Step work here, I do include my observations of the process.

The second through fourth editions of the Big Book contain additional personal stories that append the first 164 pages. They include stories by women and minorities to appeal to a broader audience. The *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* was first published in 1952 to "share 18 years of collective experience within the Fellowship on how A.A. members recover, and how our society functions" (AA 2007, 14). This title is shortened to *12 x 12*, pronounced "twelve and twelve." It serves as a supplement to the Big Book. It devotes one chapter to each of the Twelve Steps with more details on how to perform the Steps. The Twelve Traditions were formulated after the Big Book was published, and the 12 x 12 contains chapters explaining the purpose and origins of each. They serve as guidelines for how the organization should be run and are based upon trial and error in AA's early days. The Traditions are as follows:

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities

The Traditions lay out the organization, which is often described as an upside-down pyramid: the autonomous groups *are* AA, and the rest of the pyramid – the leaders as trusted servants – essentially exists to ensure that the groups can function. A group is a number of alcoholics who meet regularly. There is a saying that the only thing needed for a meeting is a coffee pot and a resentment. The meetings I surveyed in Austin were as small as five to seven regular members to over fifty. The four meetings I regularly attended ranged in size from around ten to thirty people. At these meetings, people share their “experience, strength, and hope” in recovery and form relationships with other alcoholics, in particular a sponsor. People refer to AA as “the fellowship.” Within this term are folded a number of concepts. As alcoholics, they share an essential sameness and there is equality among them. Equality amongst members is reiterated in Tradition Two, which states that leaders do not govern, and Three, which prevents barring anyone from joining out of prejudice. They are expected to form relationships of dependence upon each other. A few people voiced objections to AA being described as “self-help”; it should instead be called “mutual help.”

Depending on the size of the group, the level of formal organization may vary. Groups usually meet once a month for a “group conscience” meeting where they discuss matters affecting the group. One smaller meeting I regularly attended usually had eight to fifteen people per meeting. They had one volunteer who unlocked the rental space, made the coffee, and kept track of donations. This group had a core of regular attendees who knew and trusted one another, so these donations were deposited in a bank account under the names of two of the members, the founder and the volunteer who handled the money. They disclosed activities involving the bank account at the group conscience meetings. Another meeting I attended had dozens of members and a steering committee that consisted of rotating elected officers. Participating in volunteer

activities is called service work, and could be as simple as making coffee or emptying trash, or could be work involving more of one's time, such as serving on a committee or helping to organize area or national conventions.

The rest of the pyramid is as follows. Each group may have a general service representative (GSR). Each GSR meets with other GSR's at district meetings, the next level in the upside-down pyramid, where they may get information to be passed to their group, or they may bring up concerns their group has. Districts consist of groups close to each other geographically. The GSR's elect a district committee member (DCM) that meets with other DCM's at area meetings four times a year. At area assemblies, GSR's and DCM's elect a conference delegate that takes part in the General Service Conference, which meets once a year in April. One of the functions of the Conference is to designate what can be considered official AA literature, or "Conference-approved" literature. The U.S./Canada Conference is divided into 93 areas. There are also "intergroups" consisting of groups within a geographical area composed of several districts that facilitate the activities of the groups by manning a 24-hour hotline or maintaining websites that list meetings and other information.

The Traditions are concerned with survival of the group. According to the 12 x 12, AA allows liberty for the individual because no one is compelled to do anything. Yet, AA manages to stay together as a whole because without its program, alcoholics will die. They also discover that in order to become and remain sober, they must give away the gift of sobriety they received to other alcoholics. Individuals therefore freely place the welfare of the group first, setting aside their own desires and ambitions (AA 2007, 129-30). Along the lines of the liberal strain that runs through AA's concepts described by Ernest Kurtz, Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA who wrote the 12 x 12, defines individual liberty in a negative sense when he stresses the importance of not impinging upon the freedom of AA members by compelling them to do something. Yet, there is also liberty in a positive sense, in that AA as a group sets forth conditions for living that people ought to follow to become sober, or to achieve salvation in the Pietist formulation. I found that agency, freedom, and choice are constituted in complex and fluid ways by AA members, as in this example. A number of ethnographic examples will address this issue. In any case, the survival of the group is paramount, for without the group people would not hear AA's message. The principles of anonymity, corporate poverty, and not taking any stance on any issue other

than carrying the message prevent fractures within the organization and allow it to pursue its single-minded purpose of carrying the message without influence from other organizations.

The AA website for the Hill Country Intergroup, which includes Austin and a few outlying towns, succinctly explains AA's purpose:

A.A. members share their experience with anyone seeking help with a drinking problem; they give person-to-person service or "sponsorship" to the alcoholic coming to A.A. from any source.

The A.A. program, set forth in our Twelve Steps, offers the alcoholic a way to develop a satisfying life without alcohol.

#### What AA Does Not Do

- Furnish initial motivation for alcoholics to recover.
- Solicit members.
- Engage in or sponsor research.
- Keep attendance records or case histories.
- Join "councils" of social agencies.
- Follow up or try to control its members.
- Make medical or psychological diagnoses or prognoses.
- Provide drying-out or nursing services, hospitalization, drugs, or any medical or psychiatric treatment.
- Offer religious services or host/sponsor retreats.
- Engage in education about alcohol.
- Provide housing, food, clothing, jobs, money, or any other welfare or social services.
- Provide domestic or vocational counseling.
- Accept any money for its services, or any contributions from non-A.A. sources.
- Provide letters of reference to parole boards, lawyers, court officials, social agencies, employers, etc.<sup>1</sup>

AA is a common recovery resource because it is well-known, free, and ubiquitous. In large urban areas such as Austin, there are dozens of meetings held throughout the day. It is easy to find a meeting schedule using an internet search, and if you have questions prior to attending, you can call a hotline which is manned 24 hours a day.

There is relative ease of entry. Participants tend to be welcoming towards newcomers, but the welcome is generally limited to introducing oneself and saying things like "Glad you're here" or "Keep coming back." Tradition 11 in part states that "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion." AA members do not proselytize; they tell newcomers to come

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<sup>1</sup> <http://austinaa.org/intergroup/about-aa/>. Accessed November 9, 2015

back, but do not persuade. Thus, if you prefer to avoid speaking to anyone, you can choose a large meeting and hide in the back rows. It is possible to attend meetings for a long time, even years, before actually speaking to anyone. Some of my informants avoided conversations by arriving a little after the meeting starts or leaving right after the meeting closes. There is also the slogan “AA is a program for people who want it, not for people who need it.” This is based on practical experience with trying to help alcoholics, and also exemplifies their conceptualization of freedom and choice. Historically, asylums and the medical professions considered inebriates to be undesirable and difficult patients (Tracy 2005). In AA’s early days, the founders felt that only “low-bottom” drunks, who have lost everything and were in a state of extreme desperation, would take the necessary actions to change their mode of living (AA 2007). These experiences speak to the lack of success in efforts to persuade or compel alcoholics to stop drinking and change their lives. The fellowship has since “raised the bottom” to include people who have not lost their jobs, families, homes, or cars, but instead try to share their stories so that prospective members might identify with them (AA 2007, 23). The failure of persuasion or compulsion in changing alcoholics is expressed through a model of subjectivity that places the impetus for transformation inside the individual, in a mental state of wanting that change. One of the central problems that addiction brings to light is freedom, in this case choice. The typical AA member I encountered saw their participation in the program as a choice originating from an inner source of motivation.

There are several types of meetings. Some are open discussion meetings with a theme chosen by the moderator. Other meetings focus on studying Conference-approved literature, in particular the Big Book and the 12 x 12. Other literature used in meetings include *Living Sober*, published in 1975, which contains practical suggestions on how to make it through abstinence from alcohol; and *Daily Reflections*, published in 1990, which contains one quote from AA literature and an AA member’s reflection on that quote for each day of the year. There are also meetings focusing on the Steps, such as Steps One through Three for beginner meetings, as well as speaker meetings in which one person shares her experience for the duration of the meeting. The Hill Country Intergroup listed meetings for specific groups, such as men or women only, young people, or Spanish language. As mentioned in the previous section, people informally described some meetings as “traditional.” These meetings discouraged discussing non-Conference approved literature, although people were free to use them outside of meetings. They

restrict shares to the format of “experience, strength, and hope” to avoid turning meetings into “group therapy.” Group therapy is how they typify discourse in which people simply divulge their feelings and thoughts as they would to a therapist. I chose meetings where there was an explicit mix non-AA literature and ideas. I say “explicit” because it would be hard to argue that people do not interpret and remake AA concepts to make them applicable to their lives.

### *The Meetings*

Meetings are run by a moderator. The moderator opens with the well-known “Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I’m an alcoholic,” and then usually reads the AA Preamble by way of introduction, which is as follows:

Alcoholics Anonymous is 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. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.<sup>2</sup>

This preamble defines for the listener the nature of AA as a group. The sameness of alcoholics is implied here. The group consists of people with a common problem, alcoholism. If the listener reads the Big Book, she may notice that the book promotes alcoholism as an essential quality that alcoholics possess. They do not drink as they do out of moral or mental failings; they are biologically different from “normal” drinkers. Given that many people I spoke with embrace an interpretation of neuroscientific research on addiction that depicts addicts as having different brains, they were amenable to the notion that alcoholics are biologically different. Thus, they readily accepted that alcoholics can be demarcated as a group based on this difference. The desire to stop drinking also holds them together as a group. Membership consists of an aspect that is non-volitional – the biological difference – and one that is volitional, participating out of a desire to stop drinking. My informants emphasized that they could go to an AA meeting anywhere and feel at home. In Chapter 3, I will go into further detail the extent to which they perceived sameness among themselves as a group. As part of the emphasis on sameness, AA’s

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/smf-92\\_en.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-92_en.pdf). Accessed November 10, 2015

principle of anonymity is meant in part as an exercise in humility, to give up “natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public” so that they may work in unity (AA 2007, 187).

The moderator may then ask volunteers to read an excerpt from the chapter “How It Works,” which contains the Twelve Steps. The excerpt begins

Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it—then you are ready to take certain steps.

The first two paragraphs contain two virtues considered necessary to attain sobriety in AA’s program: honesty and willingness (AA 2001, 568). AA places the onus of recovery on the individual alcoholic based upon an implicit theory of moral agency. The slogan “AA is for people who want it, not people who need it” complements the sentence in the above quote about “wanting what we have.” According to this logic, sobriety requires work that must be voluntarily undertaken. Kate, an informant who went to meetings yet drank throughout the period of my research, framed her continued drinking according to this theory of moral agency. She said, “I’m not willing to go to any length.” She was not willing to give up the pleasures of drinking, and in addition, she was not willing to undergo the process that went beyond merely stopping drinking. She said she was unwilling to examine her life, and that the prospect of “fixing” all her “dysfunction” was too daunting. When she attempted to get a sponsor, the woman refused to help her because she felt Kate was not willing to go to any length.

“How It Works” continues,

At some of these we balked. We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not. With all the earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely. Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find Him now! Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon.

This paragraph introduces the virtue of fearlessness and the virtuous practice of surrender, or “letting go absolutely.” Surrender raises questions about will and freedom. Alcoholics are asked to give up their old ideas of themselves and how they fit in into the world, and are asked to turn themselves over to God’s will, rather than live under their own will. A number of my informants

reacted indignantly to this language. In a common American formulation of moral agency, they said that turning themselves over to God amounts to giving up personal responsibility for their actions and what happens to them. In this view, taking responsibility requires acknowledgment that the source of action is individual will and that the individual makes choices that have consequences. One can take responsibility only for actions one “owns.”

That part of the excerpt contains two powerful actors: alcohol and God. The imagery of the two squaring off is quite striking. Paul Antze (1987) observed that AA splits the two aspects of the Protestant God – the one who both threatens eternal damnation and promises eternal salvation – into alcohol and the Higher Power. In the West, alcohol has been the elixir of life and strength, reviver of spirits, promoter of friendship, and liquid courage. AA sublimates these qualities of alcohol into the Higher Power and the fellowship, both of which may save the alcoholic. In the drama AA constructs between alcohol and God, “[a]lcohol as the agent of death forces the drinker to surrender, while alcohol’s life-giving qualities... ‘transfigured’ in the Higher Power... appear to rescue him” (1987:164). Elsewhere in the Big Book, alcohol is described as a “subtle foe.” Alcoholics are not cured of alcoholism, but receive only a “daily reprieve contingent upon the maintenance” of their spiritual condition (AA 2001, 85). Aligned with God, alcoholics may defeat this foe as it manifests in their daily lives.

The “How It Works” excerpt contains concepts that underlie AA’s program. Agency is distributed over multiple entities: the alcoholic, a Higher Power, and alcohol. The notion of individual freedom is important to Americans, and AA has a rather fluid conceptualization of it. In their view, to successfully become sober, an individual must make a choice to voluntarily undertake its program that springs from an inner desire to become sober, or an inner want to have what AA members have. The alcoholic exerts voluntary effort in terms of enacting the virtues of honesty and fearlessness and goes to any length to obtain sobriety. Yet, he renounces self-will, subordinating his will to a Higher Power. The Big Book states that “Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of God’s will into all of our activities. ‘How can I best serve Thee—Thy will (not mine) be done.’... We can exercise our will power along this line all we wish. It is the proper use of the will” (AA 2001, 85). The individual acting alone is not a properly moral agent. The alcoholic recognizes himself as an actor with limited power among more powerful actors, alcohol and God, but with the ability to align himself with either.

The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions are read next, and then another volunteer reads the Ninth Step Promises as the last reading:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.

The Promises are from the chapter “Into Action” in the Big Book. The author, Bill Wilson, one of the co-founders of AA, is addressing a readership of alcoholics as an alcoholic himself. The “we” in the Promises refers to himself and the fellowship. Step Twelve states that a spiritual awakening will result from performing the Steps; the Promises indicate what a spiritually awakened life might look like. It is characterized by peace and serenity, acceptance of the past, a lack of selfishness, interest in the welfare of others, new forms of freedom and happiness, and a lack of fear. In the language of ethics, sobriety is not a means to other ends, such as success or social standing, but is an end in itself.

As opposed to a cult-like reverence, meeting participants not uncommonly play with these texts. AA members are perfectly capable of adopting a distanced, humorous stance on their own practices. Sometimes readers will alter pacing for humorous effect; e.g., turning “What an order! I can’t go through with it” in “How It Works” to “What? An order? I can’t go through with it!” Or they may interject commentary. A gay man, after the line “gain interest in our fellows” in the “Promises” interjected a suggestive “Hey hey hey.” Participants in some meetings have turned these readings into raucous call and response. One meeting reminded me of a viewing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Sometimes people bury their faces in their smartphones during the readings, and then put their phones away when others start sharing.

After the readings, the moderator introduces the topic of the meeting. If it is a literature study, a meeting in which people read and discuss Conference-approved literature, then the

relevant piece of literature is introduced. If a beginner's meeting, it might cover one of Steps One to Four. The moderator might share a recent difficulty. The floor is then opened to all members, and any subsequent share begins with "Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm an alcoholic." People are encouraged to share on the topic, but they may introduce another topic if they wish. Sharing in meetings has its roots in the experience or testimonial narratives of the Washingtonians, a temperance group formed by reformed drunkards to reform other drunkards, who in turn drew upon rhetorical innovations of the Second Great Awakening intended to provoke an emotional response in listeners. These public confessions were based on an evangelical rationale that personal experience could shed authoritative light on matters of public concern (Chavigny 1999). AA employs the rationale that personal experience carries authority, but alcoholism is approached as a private concern of individuals: AA as an organization stays out of public controversies, as stipulated in Tradition Ten and the Preamble. Unlike the Washingtonian shares, AA meetings are anonymous rather than public, and the shares are not rhetorically oriented toward recruitment. Instead, the "experience, strength, and hope" format of the shares are emblematic of Tradition Eleven, which states in part "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion." Many discussion meetings have practical topics, such as "dealing with stupid people" or surviving Thanksgiving and Christmas among relatives without drinking. "What is your conception of God/spirituality?" is a very common topic. People will sometimes break from the "experience, strength, and hope" pattern suggested in the Preamble. The most common way in which they do so is to simply share a struggle they are currently having. This can be read as an invitation to talk further with the speaker after the meeting. "Crosstalk" is discouraged. Crosstalk generally means giving advice directly to another person, interrupting, or commenting positively or negatively on another person's share. Of course, people can talk to each other about their shares after the meeting.

Around five minutes before the meeting ends, the moderator asks if anyone has a "burning desire" to share. A burning desire is something a person must share or they may end up drinking. Moderators tend to ask at this point that anyone with a year or more of sobriety who has completed the steps and is willing to serve as a sponsor would raise their hand. After the writing of the Big Book, it became AA tradition to perform the steps with a sponsor. Anniversary chips are then given out, and meetings close with participants forming a circle and either holding hands (most common) or putting arms around each other (less common) and reciting either the

serenity prayer,<sup>3</sup> the Lord's Prayer, or less commonly, the Pledge of Responsibility.<sup>4</sup> A meeting's main purpose is to "carry the message," but its other principal function is to establish friendships, or what they call fellowship, among alcoholics. This occurs after meetings in informal conversations and trips to coffee shops and restaurants. It is within these friendships outside of meetings that the bulk of recovery work occurs.

People find their sponsors at meetings. Because AA is for "people who want it, not need it," sponsees are supposed to ask a person to be their sponsor, not the other way around. A person who is unsure of their ability to commit to being someone's sponsor can either refuse or agree to be a temporary sponsor. The two will work together as long as both are willing. A sponsee may "fire" their sponsor, or a sponsor their sponsee, for whatever reason. In many cases, a sponsee simply stops contacting their sponsor. Sponsors do not generally initiate contact again because each individual must seek out recovery of their own volition. The sponsee must contact the sponsor to demonstrate the virtue of willingness. Some people warn newcomers against sponsors who actively recruit them, possibly for selfish motivations such as "13<sup>th</sup> stepping," which refers to preying on vulnerable newcomers for sexual purposes. AA members are encouraged to choose sponsors of the same gender, partly to eliminate complications arising from sexual attraction and partly because of shared experience in gender-specific alcohol problems. In my fieldsite, gay and lesbian members tended to choose sponsors of the same gender, mainly because of shared experiences. Gay or lesbian sponsors tended to deal with the issue of sexual impropriety by verbally emphasizing the non-sexual nature of the sponsor-sponsee relationship to their sponsees. A few informants did not form typical sponsor-sponsee dyads. Evelyn worked the steps with two other women, none of whom was seen as the more experienced mentor. They met as a group once a week and worked through *A Gentle Path Through The Twelve Steps*, which is not AA Conference-approved literature but is nevertheless sometimes recommended for those who have trouble with "traditional" AA. I heard about one man who had a "sponsor circle," in which a group of about five people all sponsored each other.

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<sup>3</sup> God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference

<sup>4</sup> I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that, I am responsible.

## *Relationship to Alcohol*

The first part of this work will address how my informants engaged with alcohol. Based upon their detailed descriptions of themselves before and after drinking, of how the physical sensations of alcohol were related to the social effects they were trying to obtain, I conclude that they used it as a tool to build a life, to become a particular kind of person. How does this relationship with alcohol fit in with what is known about what people do with alcohol? There is a voluminous body of work in anthropology exploring this, and I will give a brief overview here. Early alcohol studies took a functionalist approach. Bunzel (1940) examined the role of intoxication in two Central American Indian cultures. In one village in Guatemala, most people lived on isolated farms under heavy moral surveillance and paternal authority. They traveled to the village for feasts and market days, and drank heavily. Drinking served as a discharge of guilt and hostility, and resulted in frequent quarrels and sexual transgressions. In contrast, drinking facilitated social integration in the other village in Chiapas, Mexico. Lemert (1964) identified three dominant patterns of drinking in Polynesia. The patterns functioned to maintain continuity of tradition and preserve forms of social organization, or promote group solidarity by symbolically expressing hostility toward ruling elites, among other things.

Other work explored cultural relativism with regards to drinking habits. In their landmark study, MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) said that the sensorimotor impairment caused by alcohol is universal, but its behavioral effects were locally patterned. This distinction, however, suggests a dichotomy in which the body's movements are subject to biochemical processes but more complex behavior is cultural, a dichotomy this work will challenge. Mandelbaum (1979) reiterated their argument stating that the physiological effects of alcohol vary according to cultural expectations about what alcohol does to a person. Edited volumes by Marshall (1979) and Bennett and Ames (1985) examine the effect of cultural factors on the attitudes, values, and behavior that accompany drinking, and that may be relevant to the development of drinking problems. Heath (2002) describes a wide range of beneficial drinking patterns across cultures in terms of when, where, who drinks, how they drink, and why.

An edited volume by Mary Douglas (1987) explores what drinking constructs, as indicated by its title. For example, among longshoremen in Newfoundland, whether one drinks with regular or casual workers, in the tavern or the parking lot, beer or cheap wine and rum establishes relations of hierarchy and inclusion or exclusion, which in turn determines economic

security or insecurity (Mars 1987). In the Kasai region of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, men and women drink different types of palm wine depending on its sensual qualities. If the taste of wine has the quality of strength, it is for men; sweetness is for women and children (Ngokwey 1987). How alcohol consumption constitutes male gender identity is well-studied (e.g., Allison 1994, Brandes 2002, Christensen 2014). The construction of ethnic and national identity is addressed in an edited volume by Wilson (2005). For example, ceremonial exchange of drinks constructed social relationships, both egalitarian and hierarchical, in Japan (Moeran 2005). Drinking cognac at weddings signified affluence and cosmopolitanism in Hong Kong, distinguishing participants from mainland Chinese (Smart 2005); type of alcohol consumed is a mark of distinction (Bourdieu 1984).

The cultural approach in some of the above studies can be applied to my informants' experiences. Drinking practices and values specific to place shaped the identities of Jennifer, who grew up in a fun-loving west Texas town, and Chris, who grew up in New Orleans and worked in the military there, for example. However, I intend to focus on something different: how the physiological changes induced by alcohol – relaxed muscles, slower heart rate, and the like – become vehicles for signification. The physiological effects have many qualities. Being material in nature, those qualities enabled alcoholics to display the characteristics of a socially recognizable type of person in everyday situations. In this sense, alcohol is a tool they use in an ethical project to become a kind of person to which they aspire.

I mean “ethical” as used in a body of anthropological work that addresses situations in which people pose questions to themselves such as: How should I live? What kind of life is worthwhile? What kind of person should I be? Anthropologists have extensively studied excessive substance use. Alcoholism has been examined as a result of anomie (Madsen 1974), marginalization and institutionalization (Spradley 1970), and as protest (Lurie 1971). Problematic drinking has also been tied to the construction of gender (Brandes 2002, Eber 1995, Marshall 1979, Marshall and Marshall 1990), and there is literature examining how broad political economic forces shape substance use (Bourgois 1995, Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, Singer 1986, Singer et al 1992). Garcia (2010) examines the history of repeated dispossession that constitute a need for escape among Hispano heroin addicts in New Mexico. Other scholars focus on discourses of the “the addict” as a deviant figure (Foucault 1978, Sedgwick 1994), discipline of individual bodies by the demands of capital (Bourgois 2000, Friedman and Alicia

2001, Rosenzweig 1983), or the category alcoholic as a product of looping effects in the production of scientific knowledge that produces “human kinds” (Hacking 1994). I am adding a different aspect of excessive drinking to these studies: how it is an extension of non-problematic drinking.

There is a body of work in anthropology and related fields addressing the constitutive role of material objects in human affairs (e.g., Callon 1986; Gell 1998; Latour 1988, 1999, 2005; Mol 2002). Yet, I require a theory of human-object relationships that accounts for how objects play a role in the formation of human subjectivity. My informants were not delusional in thinking alcohol worked for them. Their continued drinking was not merely pathological, but was an attachment to a way of being. They had a vision of a good life, and alcohol helped them obtain that by enabling them to take on roles and identities. Heidegger’s phenomenology provides a framework for understanding this relationship with alcohol.

According to Heidegger, the starting point for understanding human activity is our everyday, absorbed engagement with objects and other people in the world. This is our most basic mode of being. “Absorbed” means that we do not go about our daily routines as Cartesian or Kantian subjects gazing upon objects. Instead, human existence is being-in-the-world, without an inside-outside distinction. This unity has three aspects: 1) our existence is a task and we pursue various possible ways to exist; 2) we are “thrown” into existing social and historical contexts; and 3) we are concretely engaged with things and people, and the objects and actions involved in these interactions are inherently meaningful. By engaging in a set of practices, we take on a way of being. A Heideggerian approach is neither subjectivist nor individualist. The threefold unity of being-in-the-world, and the other aspect of human existence, being-with other humans, are by definition relational conceptualizations of humans.

I will use Heidegger’s concept of “tool.” Tools are objects suitable for some purpose. They do not exist by themselves, but belong to structures of meaningful activity nested within broader social contexts of “systems of reference.” If we encounter some wood, hammers, and nails, they make sense to us as part of a system of reference in which people live in houses made with those materials. Tools make sense in terms of purposes. When we use these tools, we do so in accordance with their “what-for.” The what-for makes sense in terms of a whole set of tools, a “tool-whole,” that has a purpose, an “in-order-to.” For example, Ian described a night he went to Toronado’s, a famous beer bar in San Francisco. He was ordering rare lambics in bottles off the

menu. Lambics are beers brewed in particular regions of Belgium through an unusual process. The lambic's what-for is to be drunk. The bottle's what-for is to hold the lambic, and so on with the glass, counter, menu, bar tab, etc. All these tools are part of a tool-whole whose in-order-to is for the customer to purchase and drink beer. There are other layers of significance in this structure of engagement with objects. Ian purchased and drank the beer *in* this particular bar *towards* the purpose of enjoying beer difficult to obtain elsewhere *for-the-sake-of* being a man with sophisticated taste. There are many other alcohol tool-wholes that exist in religious, political, ethnic, and class domains, and are involved in varied purposes.

Alcohol's most obvious what-for is its psychoactive effects (others include standing in for the blood of Christ during communion). For example, Evan started drinking during his early years as an undergraduate in-order-to stay awake on long drives. He drove 100 miles between his university and his mother's residence multiple times a week for-the-sake-of being a helpful son assisting her during some legal troubles. Caffeine and cigarettes did not work to keep him awake during the drive, only drinking did. He would buy a six-pack at a convenience store where the clerks thought he was of legal drinking age and put it in the trunk, then stop and buy a cup of coffee. After drinking the coffee, he would rinse the cup at a rest stop, and then fill the cup with beer. The beer made him "energetic and focused." Alcohol makes sense as part of a tool-whole of psychoactive substances, and the contexts in which it is used. In-order-to stay awake on these drives, Evan turned to a series of substances that he understood would affect his physiological state, and would be available at convenience stores while he was on the way from one place to another. A Styrofoam cup with a lid is recognizable as part of the tool-whole of coffee drinking. If a police officer sees him drinking from that cup, he will make sense of the cup in terms of its usual tool-whole and assume it holds coffee.

A theory that posits a tool orientation to alcohol is useful in an American context, where an instrumental attitude towards things is common. Many recovering alcoholics, when they removed alcohol from their lives, reacted with the question "Who am I now?" Thus, alcohol is related to the question, Who am I? This is a part of American preoccupations with inventing oneself. The question arises as to whether a tool orientation to alcohol is universal or particular to an American context. In cross-cultural studies of alcohol, alcohol is used as a tool for achieving social purposes, but there is no data regarding whether it is a tool for subject-formation as in the American cases I observed.

Although mainstream addiction researchers acknowledge that addiction is a holistic condition encompassing hereditary, environmental, cultural, and historical factors, the dominance of neuroscientific approaches to addiction places the focus on individuals due to what Max Weber (1954) called methodological individualism. Neuroscience explains the mechanisms of addiction in terms of systems within the brain, such as stress, reward, and motivation (e.g., Koob et al 2014, Robinson and Berridge 2008, Salomone and Correa 2012), as well as tendencies toward impulsivity (Dalley et al 2011). The focus on individuals is imposed by the procedures and scope of laboratory experimentation, and is therefore methodological. The methods result in de facto individualism despite the researchers' actual views on addiction. Therefore, even as they intend to frame addiction otherwise, the language of researchers, clinicians, and addicts slides into individualism, and given the sometimes extreme nature of the negative consequences of alcoholic drinking, individual pathology. An anthropological approach toward alcohol as a tool counteracts methodological individualism.

However, I do not intend to replace a neuroscientific account of addiction with a social one. Neuroscience provides useful information on alcohol-induced changes in the brain. While social scientists have demonstrated that behavioral expressions of intoxication is culturally shaped (e.g., MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969), the range of behaviors enabled by a substance is limited by its pharmacology. Methamphetamine users will stay awake for days tinkering on home projects or studying for the GREs and LSAT (Pine 2007, 2015), but heroin users will not. This study makes use of the fact that alcohol produces particular perceivable physiological effects which alcoholics exploit for their purposes. Anthropologists can contribute to conversations on complex bodily phenomena like addiction by attending to the specific linkages between body and environment through analytic frameworks like being-in-the-world. Further, while it is recognized that the hedonic impact of drugs and alcohol is a means to an end in an evolutionary sense, I suggest that the hedonic impact is teleological in another sense. In addition to "to live," "how to live" is a major organizing factor of human life. In Heideggerian phenomenology, humans have existence as our task; our existence matters to us, and we are open to various possibilities for existence that are available to us in our particular time and place.

I am claiming that engagements with everyday objects help shape habitual, meaningful behaviors that indicate the type of social person one is; this raises the question, why not use Bourdieu's concept of habitus? According to Bourdieu, historically produced material conditions

of existence, which differ for groups according to their social, economic, and political position, produce habitus, which are “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*” (1977, 72; emphasis original). A habitus generates and structures how people apprehend their world and behavior. It is regular without being rule-bound, purposive without being reducible to intentional goals. Habitus perpetuates the conditions of its production and in turn shapes the social structures that produced it. Groups of people who live in the same material conditions (e.g., members of the same class) will internalize the same objective structures to some extent, and their dispositions will have many common aspects. Individual variation within class habitus is a structural variant resulting from a different trajectory as opposed to a position outside the class. The trajectory is a chronologically ordered series of structuring determinations. The habitus acquired in the family affects structuring of school experiences, and the habitus transformed by schooling underlies the structuring of subsequent experiences, and so on. Bourdieu describes the layout of a Kabyle house: where objects for particular activities are placed where, and what parts of the house are reserved for men, women, guests, and the animals. These placements are organized according to homologous oppositions of high/low, light/dark/, male/female, etc. By engaging with objects and moving through spaces organized in this manner, people learn what it means to a person in their social position. However, a common criticism of habitus is that it is deterministic. The concept is meant to address the shortcomings of both objectivism and subjectivism, but habitus emphasizes the role of objectivism, the social structures that structure habitus, and non-conscious behavior generated by this internalized structure (e.g., Brubaker 1985, Calhoun 1993, Throop and Murphy 2002). I am dealing with a process in which people deliberately and voluntarily transform their habitual ways of perceiving and engaging with their world, a highly reflexive process, and Bourdieu does not offer a way to analyze this.

### ***Switching from the Relationship with Alcohol***

People use alcohol for-the-sake-of being particular kinds of people, such as a connoisseur or a good son as in the examples above. How do they become open to other possibilities for existence? Previous studies focus on the adoption of an alcoholic identity, which allows alcoholics to internalize AA’s system of beliefs, knowledge, or conventions, which then guides their behavior. This identity is acquired through ritual. I will not present an exhaustive review of these works, but will present two exemplary studies.

Paul Antze (1987) observes that recovering alcoholics obtain a new identity through the ritual of conversion based on Lutheran and Calvinist theology. As with the doctrine of Original Sin, alcoholics have a permanent flaw, alcoholism, that leads to death. A pessimism about humankind's ability to meet the demands of the Law is reflected in the notion that alcoholics cannot stay sober on their own, but need a Higher Power and the help of other alcoholics. AA retains the judgment that pride is the foremost of human sins: AA's literature names selfishness and self-centeredness as the "root of our troubles" (AA 2001, 62). After experiencing "conviction under the Law," or a sense of their own misery and danger of eternal damnation, people experience an awakening of faith. In AA's theory of alcoholism, an alcoholic "hits bottom," or a feeling of great despair, which then leads them to surrender. The conversion effects a "symbolic alchemy" within which alcohol is equated with death, and a Higher Power with life and companionship. Antze argues that AA's "totemic" quality underlies their new identity and motivates personal change. As with totemic societies, AA members bind themselves into a collective based upon their unique vulnerability to an object, alcohol. Cain (1991) applies Van Gennep's model of ritual to the telling of personal stories in meetings. Telling the stories is a ritual in which an alcoholic's previous identity is disrupted, then reconstituted. The stories produce a sense of belonging, then identification as one of the group. The stories are structured in the conversion format described by Antze, and provides cultural model of what alcoholism is and what it means to be an alcoholic. A newcomer internalizes the cultural model through hearing the stories, comes to reinterpret her life, then tells her story in that format. Her new identity guides her present actions, self-understanding, and understanding of the past.

I also observed that the conversion narrative of AA affected the self-understandings of alcoholics I met. They came to reconfigure their past in those terms, and also depicted alcohol as an agent, an adversary determined to kill them. Yet I have reservations about using ritual as an analysis. The issue is that the significations within ritual are highly codified. The time and place, actions and speech, and use of objects express a coherent model to participants about themselves and their world. In short, rituals are clear, bounded, and structured. Although my informants participated in ritualized activities such as sharing their stories in meetings, this comprised only a small part of their ongoing labor to transform themselves. Their labor drew upon multiple American systems of signification to change self-understandings, rather than one highly structured form provided by ritual. Many engaged in transformative practices that had nothing to

do with AA, such as Zen Buddhist meditation, and sought help from people outside of the fellowship. Ritual presents things in their clearest form and provides a clear map for action, but the process of self-transformation I observed was indeterminate, fluid, and contingent rather than regimented.

In addition, the greater part of their self-transformative labor took place outside of the ritualized setting of meetings. For example, these took place in face-to-face interactions outside of meetings during which sponsors and sponsees discussed Twelve Step work, some of which I observed and recorded. Their attempts to change the ways in which they engaged with people and things occurred in their everyday routines, which I also observed. They engaged in writing as a form of reflexivity, and several informants shared their writing with me. Whatever transformative labor they engaged in and I did not observe or participate in, I had them describe in ongoing interviews.

I also have reservations about a new identity as impetus for change. People in meetings do hear others' stories and draw similarities between themselves and the speakers. If there are enough similarities, they may conclude that they, too, are like the speakers: an alcoholic. Yet, a new identity is not quite sufficient an explanation. Identification is not necessarily permanent. For some, an alcoholic identity is something that they doubt, then reaffirm repeatedly. There are also those who said, "I knew I was an alcoholic but didn't care." Still others undergo the labor of self-transformation while remaining ambivalent about whether or not they are alcoholic. But most importantly, the above depictions of alcoholic identity takes it for granted that the identity comes bundled with a set of beliefs that guide action. The term "identity" thus subsumes the processes by which people acquire new beliefs. It is more productive to analyze processes by which people change beliefs, thoughts, and feelings separately from those by which they draw similarities between themselves with others. Identity-based research on AA tends to overemphasize the importance of the same pieces of discourse appearing within utterances and the same narrative arc in personal stories. In this view, such bits of discourse indicate the presence of AA propositions within an individual's own beliefs that guide their conduct. They also indicate a uniformity in mindset among AA members. Talking during meetings is a performance in a specific context with certain informal rules for speaking. It would be difficult to draw conclusions about a person's actual beliefs from listening to these performances.

Antze's description of the "two-sided God" of AA is quite insightful. Memories of alcohol as the elixir of life and giver of many gifts were not obliterated, but essentially everyone I spoke with had internalized the conceptualization of alcohol as a giver of death. Many went to meetings to be reminded of alcohol's dangers, and the safety and salvation to be found in the fellowship. In essence, they needed meetings so they do not slip back into fully thinking that alcohol is a life-giver. Antze argues that alcohol and its dangers provide the ultimate reason for working AA's program. However, while the fear of alcohol and its consequences is indeed a powerful motivator, my informants had other powerful motives. They wanted to be good people. They wanted to treat people better. They wanted better relationships. They developed new versions of what Bernard Williams called ground projects:

A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and [provide] the motive force which propels him into the future, and gives him a reason for living... For a project to play this ground role, it does not have to be true that if it were frustrated or in any of various ways he lost it, he would have to commit suicide, nor does he have to think that...But he may feel in those circumstances that he might as well have died. Of course, in general a man does not have one separable project which plays this ground role: rather, there is a nexus of projects, related to his conditions of life, and it would be the loss of all or most of them that would remove meaning (1981:12-13).

I am analytically linking ground projects to the teleological aspect of existence in Heidegger's formulation. Sobriety is not only the absence of drinking, but depends upon the formation of new ground projects, and addresses the existential question of how to live. Their self-transformation is an ethical transformation.

### ***Ethical Transformations***

I do not mean that there is a particular set of ethics associated with drinking and another with sobriety; nor do I mean that alcoholics move from bad ethics while drinking to good ethics while sober. I use ethics<sup>5</sup> to refer to efforts to secure human flourishing as an end in itself rather than a means to some other end. Ethics involves actions in ordinary life centered on questions of How should I live? or What kind of person should I be? (Faubion 2001; Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2002; Lambek 2010; Mattingly 1998, 2012). People are evaluative, and deliberate upon their

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<sup>5</sup> Following Keane (2010, 2016), I do not treat ethics and morality as separate. Ethics encompasses morality as systems of rules and obligations.

actions, speech, thought, and feelings using shared, publically recognizable categories and qualities (Humphrey 1997; Keane 2010, 2016; Laidlaw 2014). To varying degrees, my informants evaluated their pre-drinking selves and found them lacking, and used alcohol to make up for that lack. They strove to achieve American standards of sociability and gender roles, for example Jennifer was quite aware that drinking made it easier for her to talk to men, to “put herself out there” so that she can establish a relationship with a man. Deborah and Max used the feelings of sociability produced by alcohol to smooth their relationships with their spouses.

I follow a body of work in anthropology that draws from Aristotle and Foucault with an emphasis on the cultivation of the self as a moral subject within cultural and historical contexts (e.g., Faubion 2001, 2011; Hirschkind 2006; Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Mahmood 2005; Pandian 2009). This process of self-making involves enacting virtues, which are taken to be qualities of character or self that are praiseworthy and to be cultivated, as opposed to vices, which are blameworthy and to be avoided (Aristotle *Ethics* 1103b-1106a, Kraut 2006). Here are examples of virtues and vices. Virtues: rigorous honesty (AA 2001, 58); tolerance, patience, good will toward other men (AA 2001, 70); and on page 568, willingness and open-mindedness are added to honesty as essential traits (AA 2001). Vices: self-will (AA 2001, 62), resentment (AA 2001, 64), and dishonesty and self-seeking (AA 2001, 67). These are the building blocks for addressing how to live. These virtues are not pursued for material or social gain, but because they are an end in themselves. They are part of living a spiritual life, and sobriety is essentially a side effect of that.

The term “spiritual” is intentionally vague. AA has, since its founding, distanced itself from established religious institutions to make itself available to all seeking to remain sober, and over time retained the open-endedness of the term “spirituality” (Kurtz 1988). At the time of its founding, AA attracted men who were opposed to moralistic temperance ideology but wished to stop drinking (Rotskoff 2002). Many people in Austin led a spiritual life by participating in Christian churches and commonly, Zen Buddhism, but others developed their own version. From their talk about spirituality, it can be described loosely as acknowledging that there are powers outside of you, and you align yourself with particular ones. Chris said, “God made us human. We grew from what we grew from. A little organism of nothing into human beings. And in that growth, we’re inherently capable of certain things, and one of them is emotions. When they are a full set, there is an underlying energy, guidance, power, whatever it is. That is what my higher

power is, really. Does that make sense? What it is is too many fucking words.” In all instances, spirituality can be understood by defining what it is not. A spiritual life is opposed to a life driven by self-will and self-centeredness. Their changes in habit can be described in Foucaultian terms as projects in which they made themselves into a different kind of moral being through technologies of the self, which “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (1988, 18).

To perform transformative operations on themselves, alcoholics must learn which of their thoughts, feelings, and actions are a problem, and what they should be thinking, feeling, and doing instead. To do this, they learn a mode of moral reasoning from their sponsors and other alcoholics. This reasoning is not based on following rules or norms, nor does it rely on intensional definitions. An intensional definition provides the meaning of an expression by specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for correct use of that expression, while an extensional definition provides examples of situations in which the expression is applicable. For example, an intensional definition of “bachelor” is “unmarried man,” while an extensional definition is a list of those men (Cook 2009). There is no intensional definition of “spirituality,” or what any of the virtues and vices are. When they evaluate their behavior, they engage in non-intensional likeness-making. In this mode of argument, if a sponsor describes a sponsee’s behavior as dishonest, the sponsor does not come up with a definition of dishonesty, but shares experiences in which she was dishonest and explains how that is connected to the sponsee’s behavior. Recovering alcoholics are taught to make connections pragmatically, contextually, and improvisationally.

This kind of reasoning forms relations between signs; it is a semiotic process. To understand this process, and the processes of meaning-making my informants undergo in general, I will make use of Peircean semiotics. Peirce defined the sign as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce 1955). His theory of signs moves the focus from individual consciousness to what occurs between social beings within a common framework of experience and action (Colapietro 1989). It grounds signification in the material world; a wide range of material phenomena may act as sign vehicles. It is a tripartite model as opposed to a Saussurean model of a sign as consisting of signifier and

signified. A Peircean sign consists of an object, sign-vehicle, and an interpretant. It is also processual model of the sign. Instead of a static relation of a sign standing for its object (e.g., word and concept, representation and state of affairs), a sign has the ability to give rise to a series of signs (Colapietro 1989, Irvine 1989, Kockelman 2005, Parmentier 1994, Peirce 1955).

I will illustrate these concepts using alcohol. I will go back to Ian's trip to Toronado's to have lambics. Lambics do not use cultivated yeasts for fermentation. They have a distinctive brewing process using open-air fermentation, in which the region's wild yeasts and bacteria settle into the vat. The bar manager, a beer expert, complimented Ian on his selections, telling him, "Nice! You're drinking up my private stock." I asked Ian whether he ordered fruit lambics – I suspected he did not – and he said, "I was after something more pure and extreme" (fruit lambics are relatively common in the United States). I asked, "Extreme as in weird tasting?" "Yeah. Also reputation. Rarest, most sophisticated. Also it's an acquired taste." He continued,

You have to know what a lambic is. Then you have to acquire the taste which takes work. Then you have to have knowledge of the existence of rarer, more highly prized lambics, and understanding of the characteristics of lambics to understand their value. Then you need knowledge and the will to acquire them, and appreciate them once you have them. Lambics taste sour. Smell like socks. Like Islay whiskeys taste like Band-Aids.

Ian's lambic tasting is a fairly complex semiotic phenomenon, but I will use parts of it to illustrate some of Peirce's concepts. The tripartite sign contains three trichotomies. In the first trichotomy, features of sign vehicles can be divided into three types. The following treatment of lambic as sign vehicle owes a debt to Manning (2012). The rare lambics Ian ordered possess numerous qualities, but only a few are relevant to understanding the drink as a lambic; for example, sourness and a smell like socks. These characteristics are qualisigns. Other qualisigns of a lambic include a golden color, a bit of cloudiness, and small head. Any lambic would have these qualisigns. There may be other qualities not relevant to a beer being a lambic, such as the addition of fruit, rarity, and percentage of alcohol by volume. Yet the relevant qualities are mere potentialities until Ian experiences them as embodied in an actual existing lambic. The particular lambic Ian drank is a sinsign. It is a token of a type that is recognizable as a distinct beer by social convention. The type or category "lambic" in this sense is a legisign.

The second trichotomy involves the "ground," or the relationship between the object and sign vehicle. There are three sign relations: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. An icon bears a

formal resemblance to its object. An index has a relationship of physical connection or contiguity. A symbol stands for its object based on convention alone (e.g., the word “beer” and the liquid it signifies). The third trichotomy is what the interpretant takes the sign-relation to be. It is never readily apparent how a sign will be interpreted. Interpretation depends on the frameworks available to the interpreter. Ian had spent time learning about beer from experts until he became an expert himself. Therefore for him, the lambics were what Manning (2012) calls “source-identifying indexicals.” The distinctive tang and aroma of the lambic indexed a distinct Belgian brewing process. Ian knew the cause-effect relationship between the brewing and the qualities of the lambic, and so for him the lambic is an index. He learned to identify these qualities and associate them with the brewing process through “a chain of discursive authentication,” or the expert discourse on beer that Ian learned from his fellow beer connoisseurs. A person unfamiliar with the expert discourse might take a sip and dismiss the beer as merely odd-tasting. The expert discourse also grades the lambics according to rarity—some are more difficult to obtain than others—and hence desirability.

Sign relations are rarely confined to just one type. The lambics are also indexical icons from the point of view of the interpreter. Michael Silverstein, in his discussion of “wine talk” amongst oenophiles, observes that “As we consume the wine and properly (ritually) denote that consumption, we **become**, in performative realtime, the well-bred, characterologically interesting (subtle, balanced, intriguing, winning, etc.) person iconically corresponding” to the ways in which wine talk describes the wine (2003, 226; emphasis original). Similarly, in Ian’s example, there is an iconic relationship between the rare, sophisticated lambic and himself; he comes to have those qualities as he orders and appreciates them. There is also an indexical relationship in that appreciation of the rare lambics is indexed to a category of person: a sophisticated beer connoisseur. The effects of the lambic once Ian drinks it are indexical. Alcohol causes physical relaxation, inhibits planning and decision making in the prefrontal cortex, and impacts the brain’s reward system, producing a feeling of pleasure. In the United States, and in a person who interprets the bodily sensations of relaxation, disinhibition, and hedonic impact as good or desirable, the effect may be merry garrulousness. The smiling face and laughter are indexical icons of a fun, sociable person, if at a bar or party, for example. If in the middle of a workday, they will be indexical icons of an irresponsible drunk. And, if Ian continues to drink such that

alcohol's effects in the brain produces stumbling, slurring, and saying inappropriate things, then these act as indexical icons of a drunk as well.

The drinker as interpreter does not perceive molecular activity in the brain, but does feel bodily sensations after taking a drink. The cascade of molecular activity in the brain that alcohol initiates is communicative in Gregory Bateson's (1972) sense of a system that responds to differences that make a difference toward the maximization of certain variables. My study suggests that one variable is whatever possibility for being-in-the-world the drinker is enacting or attempting to enact. As previously mentioned, the immediate effect of an initial drink is referred to in addiction literature as a hedonic impact, or a "wow" sensation as one researcher described it. In Chapter 1, I will work out ways that this molecular "wow" is not isolable, but is one aspect of a semiotic process in which the drinker enacts the qualities of a socially recognizable category of person. The brain is embedded in a network of neurons that extend throughout the body, and the body is embedded within a social world filled with other beings that also have the capacity to interpret the bodily state, speech, and motions of themselves and others. The interpretations and understandings of addicts are not epiphenomenal to the biochemistry. My study can make no claims about how, precisely, the neural mechanisms within the reward system link up to broader social semiotic processes. What I have access to are descriptions of the phenomenology of substance use experiences, and descriptions of social contexts in which substance use are embedded. My work examines processes of signification that take place when bodies interact with alcohol in a cultural context. Anthropologists have traditionally studied meaning through publically available vehicles for signification as Geertz suggested, and later anthropologists emphasized material qualities perceptible to other people. I extend these approaches to analyze alcohol's material, internal physical effects as vehicles for signification. I use the term "internal" to refer to states not perceptible to other people. Semiotics may provide a theoretical closing of the gap between physicochemical processes and the sensibilities and self-understandings that are part of being-in-the-world.

I have particular interest in the interpretant, in how it affects what the sign-relation between object and sign vehicle is. Ian's example included one factor that affects the interpretant, which is social systems of reference that produce frameworks such as beer connoisseurship. He put in time and effort to learn about lambics from authoritative sources of information on beer, and went to bars known to serve coveted varieties. This training in beer

connoisseurship forms part of the framework by which the qualities of lambics as sign vehicles are interpretable. Another factor I will explore is Heidegger's concept of mood.<sup>6</sup>

We relate to the world through having a sensibility, or moods that incline or disincline us to comport ourselves toward tools and people. Moods are not the same as emotions. Mood is the “basic way in which [we] let the world matter to [us]” (Heidegger 1962:213). They are not inside of us in an interior space, but neither are they outside of us:

A human being who—as we say—is in good humour brings a lively atmosphere with them. Do they, in so doing, bring about an emotional experience which is then transmitted to others, in the manner in which infectious germs wander back and forth from one organism to another? We do indeed say that attunement or mood is infectious...Attunements are *not side-effects*, but are something which in advance determine our being with one another. It seems as though an attunement is in each case already there, so to speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and which then attunes us through and through...they are a fundamental way of being...and this always directly includes being with one another (Heidegger 1995, 67).

Moods are not a kind of being that appears in our interactions with each other, nor are they inconstant, fleeting, and merely subjective. They are the fundamental ways in which we find ourselves inclined or disinclined (Heidegger 1995, 67). In the Cartesian view, passions are adjacent to reason; however, mood does not merely overlay an otherwise rational intellect. Mood is how we are attuned to the world. In other words, our orientation towards the world is affective.<sup>7</sup> This determines whether we will engage with people and things at all, as well as how we engage with them. One of the key elements in the above paragraph is that moods are not “side effects” of our thinking, doing, and acting, but are the “presupposition” for such things (Heidegger 1995, 67-8).

This dissertation is in part an attempt to meld Peircean semiotics with Heideggerian phenomenology. Paul Kockelman (2011, 2013) addresses affective aspects of being-in-the-world from a semiotic stance. He discusses “affective unfoldings.” This term is counterposed to concepts such as emotion in that affective unfoldings are semiotic processes comprised of

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<sup>6</sup> Heidegger's original term is *befindlichkeit*. It is a neologism derived from the common German way to ask “How are you?”, “Wie befinden Sie sich?”, which can be literally translated as “How do you find yourself?” *Befindlichkeit* is commonly translated as attunement, sensibility, and state-of-mind. In the Macquarrie and Robinson translation, the term “mood” is used alongside “state-of-mind.” Two anthropologists, E. Valentine Daniel and Jason Throop, use the term mood, and I follow them in this usage.

<sup>7</sup> This discussion of mood originated in Simon Critchley's Heidegger seminar at the Institute for Critical Social Inquiry at the New School for Social Research, 2015.

multiple components. The components may include an eliciting situation such as hearing a gunshot, an involuntary physiological change such as a rush of adrenaline, a signal such as a response cry, an action such as fleeing, a “feeling” of some kind, and an interpretation of these phenomena. As a sign, an unfolding may be interpreted by others as a single ascription of an emotion, such as “This person is scared.” Affective unfoldings are significant because as processes they participate in how a self is made. A self may interpret its own sign and evaluate its semiotic processes depending on whether those processes allow it to “founder or flourish.” The self’s affective interpretations of its affective interpretations may shape future affective unfoldings.

Kockelman specifies the ways in which affect, as an interpretant and a potential sign, plays a role in semiotic processes and in the formation of a mode of being-in-the-world. Yet I hesitate to adopt his model because I wish to hold back from systematizing the components of mood and their role in semiosis in order to further explore some characteristics of mood that Heidegger describes. Mood is “atmospheric.” Phenomenologically, mood may be experienced as diffuse, totalizing, and perduring, and I am not sure of the extent to which it can be fully integrated into the particulate precision of Peircean semiotics. This is an issue that I do not resolve in this dissertation, but plan to address in future work. I do not mean that mood cannot be productively articulated with Peircean semiotics, nor do I take mood as an analytic prime.<sup>8</sup> Mood is both generated and generative. For the purposes of this work, I will approach mood as a predisposing factor in determining the interpretant, and will leave a more detailed and specific rendering of that relation for future work.

The contagion aspect of mood is probably something many people can grasp intuitively from experiences of, for instance, going to parties, sporting events, or festivals, becoming immersed in the “atmosphere” of the crowd, in Heidegger’s terms, and being carried along by the collective mood, or simply by being in the presence of a person with a pronounced mood. The mood is conveyed semiotically, through facial expression, gestures, the tone of people’s voices. Factors may affect one’s ability to be “infected,” including one’s past experience. A person taught that a more reserved manner is the proper expression of emotion, for instance, or a person who developed a fear of crowds, may resist contagion. In any case, mood is a disposition

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<sup>8</sup> A thank you to Judith Irvine for pointing out the pitfalls in not further interrogating Heidegger’s description of mood as “already there” and being “in advance” of our being with one another.

to create an interpretant of a particular sort. For example, mood may transform the beads thrown from a float at a Mardi Gras from plastic objects destined for a landfill to coveted items to be proudly displayed around one's neck. In subsequent chapters, I will present ethnographic examples of mood in semiosis within drinking and recovery context. Mood may be transformations that open up different possibilities for being by transforming the sign relations within a context.

Other scholars have explored how mood plays a role in opening potentialities. Jason Throop applied the notion of mood to moral problematization. He observes that mood is linked to “perduring residues of the sources of their past evocations, contexts, and causes.” Moods are also anticipatory. Throop describes particular moods evoked by the “totalistic” situation of an individual's existence in which she questions her very existence as a moral being among other moral beings (2014, 69). This type of mood will be examined in Chapter 2, which describes several of my informants' experience with stopping drinking. In these moods, there is possibility for change. Valentine Daniel sketches out a mood which shuts down anticipation for the future. This was a perduring mood among a group of Tamils in the wake of horrific anti-Tamil violence in 1983, a “gray mood” that “hangs over like a fog of which neither the beginning for the end can be fathomed” (1996, 105). For both Throop and Daniel, mood is not simply a fleeting phenomenon, but may linger beyond the moment it is engendered. Constant disruptions and violence in the present disrupted the flow of semiosis that is characteristic of human life. For them, the future is so uncertain as to be nonexistent. If they were able to have some control over what might happen in the future, then they could play a role in ongoing meaning-making processes that are essential to human lives. Instead, their lives are trapped in the violent present (1996, 125). They are unable to comport themselves toward any kind of future. The moods described in this dissertation are the obverse of such a mood. In their interactions with each other, recovering alcoholics establish a mood that pushes meaning-making processes in a novel direction, making habit acquisition possible.

### ***Chapter Overview***

The first chapter, “Bodily Modes of Semiosis,” argues that within an American culture of self-improvement and self-quantification, my informants used alcohol's physical effects as tools to embody socially recognizable traits. In contrast to earlier work in anthropology that

emphasized publically available sign vehicles outside the body, I reveal how alcohol's material, internal physical effects serve as vehicles for signification. Alcohol creates durable links of signification between transformed qualities that the body displays and the qualities of the kind of person alcoholics aspire to be. Repetition of actions with these links give rise to ingrained habit.

The second chapter, "Stopping Drinking: Problematization and American Personhood," examines the historical and social transformations that enabled people to undergo personal transformations. It examines stopping drinking not as an event, but a process. It presents a range of ways in which people problematized their drinking, and the cultural resources by which they did so.

The third chapter, "Truth-telling and Likeness," focuses on a central ethical practice in creating a sober life: avoiding "alcoholic" vices such as dishonesty and enacting sober virtues such as truth-telling. Truth-telling occurs within nested relations of likeness with historical truth-telling speech genres, such as Christian confession, American evangelical witnessing, and psychotherapy. Alcoholics also create relations of likeness between themselves and their truth-telling interlocutors. The chapter explores criteria for determining truthfulness, such as the language ideology of inner reference, the personalist theory of meaning, and notions of authenticity in which the outer self matches the inner self. To identify truth, they employed a mode of argument in which they compared behaviors, forming analogies and relations of similarity between them, and took context into consideration. My informants were also concerned with the proper way to tell the truth.

The fourth chapter, "Mood and Extrinsic Modes of Moral Reasoning," further explores the mode of moral reasoning my informants employed to undergo a moral transformation. Rather than applying general maxims, my informants learned a mode of moral reasoning that establishes relations of likeness or analogy between their day-to-day actions and examples of actions categorizable as virtues or vices. This chapter also explores the role of mood, or affective orientation to the world, within moral deliberation. What mood one is in shapes how one interprets significations. It also determines receptivity to novel significations, such as what counts as honest behavior, and willing and able to enact those behaviors. As their enactment of re-signified actions accumulated, their habits transformed.

The fifth chapter "'Making Small': Materiality and Experiential Contouring" addresses one aspect of the question, How do people experience their minds? By what practices do they

rescale mental experiences to facilitate the labor of transforming themselves into sober people? When feeling distressed, they experience their minds as vast and unbounded. To counteract this, they exploit the materiality of their bodies as well as discursive and writing practices to make their minds “small.” The chapter presents types of “bigness” that people experience, and the semiotic operations they undertake to achieve a particular state of “smallness.”

## CHAPTER II

### **“It Works Until It Doesn’t”: Materiality and Meaning in Alcoholism**

Ana, a slender, elegant woman past retirement age, called herself an alcoholic yet continued to drink. She was a serious student of Argentine tango who said alcohol improved her dancing. She tended to be preoccupied with her form. She has seen pictures of herself dancing, and her shoulders are raised rather than dropped, and her head is in a forward position rather than being held back and up. She said, “When people first dance with me, they will say, when they first hold me, You’re really tense. Relax.” Dancers reciprocate a level of tension in their bodies when they hold each other before a dance. “However much you give me, I give back to you so that I’m not pushing you, but mostly we’re just there until you do something.” She put her left hand in its position on her partner’s body. “This doesn’t move a lot.” She raised her right hand into its position holding her partner’s hand. “This one will just stay still. But they will take hold of me and in three or four steps they will say, Relax, Ana.”

When dancing, she said she feels “a constant awareness of all the things I do wrong. I’m much better at telling you the twelve things I did wrong than the three I did right. I’m very much aware of what I don’t know how to do, even though I know a lot. It’s crazy.” Other dancers tell her they love watching her dance or watching her feet. Despite the praise, she worried. “My feet do subtly inelegant things. There are ways of moving your feet or pointing your toes that can look subtly not elegant. I know what those things are, and sometimes I can feel myself doing them. It makes a big difference in how your foot looks. If you watch people, it’s what makes it look just beautiful and elegant and perfect, as opposed to just, So what?” She was aware of many other subtle bodily postures that look inelegant. “I want to do it right. I can be physically tense for those reasons. Putting alcohol in my system – a certain level – obviously undoes some of those tight springs. All of that tightness, it loosens it all the way. I can do it without it, but with fortification, it’s just so much easier. It loosens my head, too.” The structure of the dances limited her drinking. She could drink only during the rest period between the sets of songs for

dancing. Because she usually talked to others during these breaks, she did not have time to get drunk.

When Ana's body and head are "loose," she can improvise. "We're not just doing, boom boom, rock step, boom boom, rock step. Given the opportunity, and the music is right, I embellish whatever's going on in the music." These embellishments make her distinctive. "It's a thing I do. I think that's important, to make them look good. I like that. If they feel that I make them look good, then they'll ask me to dance again." There are more women interested in ballroom dancing than men, she said, and there is no shortage of young, fit women dressed in provocative clothing. However, being a good dance partner made her visible among the younger women. Yet, there is another side to her drinking. She continued drinking after the dances. She was convicted of driving while intoxicated (DWI), and attributed other troubles to her drinking. She lost a considerable amount from her retirement funds after giving away large sums to help people she suspected were taking advantage of her. She said she should stop drinking, but she did not want to because she had no guarantee her life would get better.

In the United States, when an alcoholic talks about the positive effects of alcohol, a common response is that they must be in denial or delusional. AA and recovery culture have adopted the Freudian defense mechanism of denial to explain why people continue to drink despite negative consequences. The notion that alcoholics are deluded can be found in the culture at large. For example, a popular textbook contains the following description of a particular level of blood alcohol concentration: "[W]e become uninhibited enough to enjoy our own 'charming selves' and...become witty, clever, and quite sophisticated, or at least it seems we are" (Hart et al 2009:210). Paul Manning describes "an average drunk" as follows: "if you drink a lot of [cocktails], you will suffer delusions of wit and charm, get drunk, fall down, puke, get the spins, and mercifully black out" (2012:7).

However, blacking out, DWI's, and the like occur at one end of a trajectory of effects, either in one drinking occasion or over a lifetime. This article explores one way in which alcoholics obtained value from drinking. People used alcohol as a "way to harness the experiential or experimental potential of the body" (Raikhel and Garriott 2013, 28). Alcohol's physical effects occur within self-interpreting, self-evaluating beings with values and purposes. My informants exploited alcohol's perceivable physical effects for the sake of embodying the qualities of social personae they aspired to be. Thinking about how alcohol is intertwined within

Ana's commitment to her vision of the good life will help us understand why she continues to drink, instead of dismissing her as delusional or diseased. In this article, I develop an approach to understanding how people use alcohol as a tool to achieve their ethical projects. This requires an analysis that does not treat my informants as meaning-making subjects who attribute qualities and powers to a neutral object, alcohol. An analysis must consider their material engagements with alcohol: what the bodily changes it induced signified for them, and what these meaningful changes enabled them to do. To explore this, I will examine interlocking sets of interactions at different scales, including physical sensations, self-interpretation, social categories of persons, and the mutual evaluation of people in a social context.

### *American Tool Use*

This chapter will describe a relationship with alcohol that developed under particular cultural and historical conditions: alcohol as a tool in the Heideggerian sense. Using alcohol as a tool arises from an instrumental orientation to value. Utility is a typical way Americans talk about why something is valuable to them. Yet, using alcohol as a means toward self-improvement is an embarrassment, as exemplified by the phrase "using alcohol as a crutch." A crutch is a tool for a person with an injury. If you do not actually have an injury, why are you using a crutch? If you do use alcohol to help you socially, do you want to admit to having the kind of injury that requires a crutch? Given the common stigmatizing discourse of "delusions of wit and charm," alcoholics do not readily talk about how alcohol helps them become kinds of people.

A review of drinking practices in different times and places revealed that alcohol has a great deal of utility to drinkers. One example is the well-known case of Japanese male workers. They gather after work to drink together and violate the usual rules of etiquette and deference to hierarchy. Anne Allison explains that for these men, "the Western praise for those who 'can hold their liquor well' misses the point in Japan, where many drink to achieve the freedom and the chance to act irresponsibly that comes with drunkenness. The tendency is to drink hard, to get drunk, and to act drunk even when the drinking has just begun" (1994, 46). At gatherings, Japanese people pour drinks for each other. It is odd to pour one's own drink. The purpose of pouring drinks is to express friendship and to open communication with one another (Hendry 1994, Moeran 2005). Paul Manning (2012) describes a use of vodka among the indigenous

Khevsur people of Georgia in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. An exchange of vodka occurs between young people who are not eligible to marry, but carry on a doomed romance. The girl steals and saves vodka bit by bit to fill a bottle to give to her boyfriend. Stealing and saving signifies love, waiting, pining, and marking time until they can meet again. She gives the vodka to the boy when they meet, and he gives her a gift in exchange.

American historical accounts contain a range of uses for alcohol. After 1650, rum became the most common beverage and an essential commodity in domestic and foreign trade. Traders brought molasses from the British West Indies, and major distilleries appeared from Philadelphia northward. The colonies encouraged brewing, distilling, and innkeeping, and profited from taxes and tariffs on alcohol (Blocker 1989, Krout 1925). Up to the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early nineteenth century, people drank hard cider, beer, and distilled spirits in quantity. People generally drank small amounts throughout the day at home. Preindustrial rhythms of work in fields and household workshops allowed for “dram drinking,” or drinking a glass periodically throughout the day (Chavigny 1999). These drinks were considered healthful, used as medicine, and valued for fostering camaraderie and relaxation. Drink was expected at communal activities like house- or barn-raising, harvesting, husking, and land clearing, and women drank when they gathered to sew, quilt, or pick seeds out of cotton (Blocker 1989, Lender and Martin 1982, Rorabaugh 1979). Alcohol’s properties lent it to particular uses. Its antiseptic properties made it an alternative to water and milk of dubious quality. Its psychoactive properties made it a welcome alternative to those drinks, and also a valued exchange commodity for labor. Benjamin Franklin wrote in a 1774 *Poor Richard’s Almanac* that “He that drinks his *Cyder* alone, let him catch his *Horse* alone” (as cited in Murdock 1998, 10). In addition to forming neighborly ties through communal work and social activities, drink cemented other kinds of relationships. Politicians curried favor with drink, and compensation to workers commonly included alcohol (Powers 1998). There was only one polling place per county, and voters had to travel a long distance to discharge their duty. After doing so, voters expected to be rewarded in drink (Lender and Martin 1982). Taverns, in addition to offering travelers lodging and a place for locals to socialize, conduct business, exchange news, and enjoy entertainments (Lender and Martin 1982), served as meeting places for locals to organize militias, and as hospitals, headquarters, and barracks during the Revolution (Conroy 1995).

Per capita consumption of alcohol increased after the Revolutionary War. After the war, there was increased domestic trade, urban growth, greater specialization in commerce and manufacturing, regional specialization, and production of crops for market. In the early nineteenth century, consistent surpluses of corn in the Midwest were converted into whiskey with distillation technology brought by Irish and Scottish immigrants. The whiskey and beer industries expanded further from 1800 to the 1840s. In the 1840s, German immigrants introduced lager brewing technology and established large-scale breweries in the Midwest. Evidence suggests alcohol consumption increased as well (Blocker 1989, Krout 1925, Rorabaugh 1979). Measured in terms of pure alcohol, per capita consumption was around 3.6 gallons per annum in 1800 and then peaked in 1830 at 3.9 gallons. Consumption decreased to one gallon per person per year in 1845 after several waves of temperance activity (Rorabaugh 1979). The whiskey and beer industries expanded further after the Civil War, as the industries employed the nation's growing immigrant population and used expanding rail systems to distribute product more widely (Acker 2005, Blocker 1989, Krout 1925, Powers 1998, Rorabaugh 1979).

Drinking patterns also changed. In urban areas, people brewed less at home. "Dram drinking" of the past did not suit routinized work in factories, and so male workers drank outside the home in saloons (Blocker 1989, Gusfield 1987, Rosenzweig 1983). Affluent men drank at home, in restaurants, or private clubs (Rotskoff 2002). Saloons and clubs created a separate male domain. While it was not uncommon for saloons to have a separate parlor with its own entrance that for women, usually the wives of customers, the main drinking areas were for men (Duis 1983, Powers 1998, Stivers 1976). Saloons and clubs provided spaces for displays of varied forms of masculinity. Buying rounds established reciprocity or created hierarchies. Masculinity was variously expressed at different levels of intoxication. Men could drink large quantities without visible signs of intoxication, be openly intoxicated without censure, or be aggressive and violent. Other male behaviors included cursing, telling ribald jokes and stories, and gambling (Powers 1998, Stivers 1976). Saloon offered practical services such as banking, check-cashing, and opportunities for jobs in ethnic immigrant communities and in the frontier where they were otherwise unavailable, but were also a source of political controversy. In urban areas, voters depended on ward politicians for favors such as jobs and bail. Saloons provided politicians a place to contact and organize workingmen, and received favorable licensing terms and inattention from police in return. Saloons came to be associated with corruption and the rising

Irish political power. In Boston, saloons were disproportionately Irish-run, and served as organizing centers for Irish political machines (Kingsdale 1973, Powers 1998).

Immigrants brought their drinking habits with them. Germans operated beer gardens where both men and women drank, in contrast to native-born white American women. Irish women also drank with their men. They brought the custom of *shebeens* to urban areas. Shebeens were operated by women, particularly widows, who sold and served their homebrews out of their kitchens to provide themselves with income (Blocker 1989, Stivers 1976). Italian women drank during the day in groups in their tenements (Powers 1998). Women drinking in public became a marker of ethnic and class status during this time. Public drinking by women was associated with loss of sexual purity because they were associated with the male culture of the saloon, and were considered a threat to social order (McClellan 2000).

In the nineteenth century, “respectable,” native-born Americans mostly considered drinking to be a male activity. Other ethnic groups had their own drinking patterns. Saloons and clubs facilitated male homosociality and allowed men to display varied forms of masculinity and status. Over the course of the century, the plentiful supply of alcoholic beverages, combined with urbanization and industrialization, created drink-related social problems on a scale not seen before, and changing drinking patterns due to the influx of immigrants and increased drinking by women was seen as a threat to social order. Beginning around the 1820s, one of the largest social movements in the United States, the temperance movement, arose first to limit drinking and then to eliminate it altogether. I will be discussing this movement in more detail in the next chapter, but raise the issue here to point out that to a large segment of the population, alcohol was a threatening substance.

Catherine Murdock (1998) traces a parallel development to the saloons, that of respectable Victorian women’s drinking. She argues that this respectable drinking formed the foundation for twentieth century drinking practices. In contrast to saloons, which were stigmatized as dens of vice, respectable drinking developed within the home. In the nineteenth century, women still brewed beer and wine at home, and cookbooks and etiquette manuals taught the proper way to serve those drinks. Alcohol was served at varied entertainments, such as afternoon teas, christenings, wedding breakfasts, dinners, and balls. In these ways, drinking became respectable for women. From 1880-1920s, respectable heterosocial drinking increased. More women began drinking in public at restaurants and dining rooms in fancy hotels. Beer

gardens became a popular weekend activity for respectable couples, as did drinking and dancing at cabarets. Cocktails, an American invention, and cocktail parties were linked to hospitality, graciousness, and conviviality. During the Prohibition era, cocktail parties at home became popular, and it was likely that cocktails were featured to disguise the poorer quality of the liquor. Drinking became modern, secular, and fashionable in contrast to the strict, religious Victorian morality of the temperance movement. Replacement of the all-male saloon with heterosocial drinking spaces “speaks of the elimination of a masculine subculture based on exclusivity, inebriety, and violence” (1998, 8). After the repeal of Prohibition, the alcohol industry campaigned to convince the public that drinking could be respectable, that drinking took place in respectable, quintessentially American spaces like a backyard barbecue, and that women could drink without risk to their health or reputation. Government and industry promoted “moderation” to increase public acceptance of drinking. Scenes of glamorous drinking in films proliferated after restrictions on depicting drinking in movies were lifted (Rotskoff 2002). When Prohibition went into effect in 1920, the majority of Americans supported it as a measure against the harms produced by alcohol. Within a few decades, drinking became associated with a host of acceptable qualities. In historical accounts, alcohol was used to assert an identity, whether a working class ethnic identity for some nineteenth century men, or a modern, cosmopolitan identity for young women flappers in the 1920s. Alcohol was used to fulfill social aspirations, as when women served the latest, most fashionable drinks using the proper accoutrements at entertainments in their homes.

Cross-cultural or historical studies of alcohol reveals that alcohol has utility, but I did not find data regarding the use of alcohol as a tool to form a particular kind of subjectivity. The lack of data does not completely eliminate the possibility that people have done so in different times and places. However, I am inclined to posit alcohol tool use as a contemporary American phenomenon, and limit a Heideggerian approach to this case only for the present. As described in the Introduction, the culture of self-invention in the United States engendered its most instrumental, self-maximizing forms in recent decades. Alcoholics who use alcohol as a tool are not at first “sick,” then move into self-improvement culture and neoliberal notions of self-maximization. They were there all along.

## *Analytic Framework*

More work is needed that bridges levels of interaction from the properties of the object of addiction to the social and cultural context of use. Pine (2007, 2010) and Schull (2012) demonstrate how methamphetamine and gambling addictions, respectively, are a window to condition in contemporary post-Fordist capitalist societies. For Pine, in the new precarious economy, productivity, risk, and performance enhancement are prized, and the neurochemical effects of methamphetamine produce “fast subjects” that embody this form of capitalism. Schull worked with machine gambling addicts who used the machines not to win money but to enter “the zone,” a state of trancelike absorption in which their sense of self and their connection to their social world are suspended. She focused on how individuals are expected to be autonomous, rational managers of risk. The machines do not shield the gamblers from risk, but narrows the range of choices and smoothes volatility through payout schedules. Thus, the risks and choice characteristic of players’ lives away from the machines become the means by which they enter the zone. It is not merely that some individuals are more susceptible to addiction. Gambling addiction develops through the interaction between the gambler and gambling technology.

Alcohol and an alcohol-transformed body allows the drinker to embody qualities that fulfill some purpose. Alcohol affects mood and how that affords different possibilities for engaging with one’s world. I will draw upon Heidegger’s phenomenology to explore the purposive aspects of drinking and the relationship between people and objects. Specifically I will analyze how alcohol as an object is constitutive of their sense of self. I will introduce ethics as projects of self-making into the phenomenological analysis. Alcoholics do not arbitrarily assign subjective meanings to objective phenomena. In order to demonstrate that they are not merely delusional, a precise rendering of how they interpret alcohol as useful is needed. I will use the semiotics of C. S. Peirce to delineate how people take their behaviors to mean something and how relations are formed between bodies, “mental” states, and cultural systems of meaning.

A phenomenological and semiotic analysis of alcoholics’ experiences of alcoholism is of interest beyond addiction research. It demonstrates ways in which ethical questions of “How should I live?” are entwined within conditions otherwise categorizable as biological. It also shows how biological states enter meaning-making processes. The neurophysiological effects of alcohol have perceptible qualities that allow them to be recruited as sign vehicles. In addition,

physical states in the form of mood determine which qualities get picked up in interpretive processes. An approach to addiction that links biological and semiotic processes moves away from the methodological individualism common in addiction research and bridges an analytic gap between biology and culture.

### *The Purposive Nature of Drinking*

During AA meetings and initial conversations, my informants tended to talk about their drinking using the typical AA narrative of dysfunctional drinking, hitting bottom, seeking help, and realizing the true alcoholic nature of their drinking. They focused on the negative consequences of drinking that led them to identify as alcoholic. Sometimes they shared “drunkalogues,” narratives about drinking mishaps told with bravado. There was, however, a slogan I heard at meetings that hinted at other aspects of their experiences of drinking: “It works until it doesn’t.” I wondered in what ways alcohol worked for them. I asked Ana and others to describe their thoughts, feelings, and actions before and after drinking in a manner that did not interpret those thoughts, feelings, and actions as alcoholic symptoms. This proved to be an atypical way for them to think about their drinking. Two did not deviate from the AA narrative and continued to describe their drinking as a “sickness.” Some felt embarrassment. Emma, whose experiences I will relate later in this chapter, occasionally blushed, covered the lower half of her face with her hands, and laughed aloud. She said, “I haven’t thought of these things in years.” Once, she called to her husband in the other room, “Are you listening to this?” I questioned them in this manner to obtain a sense of how they experienced and interpreted their bodily states while drinking and to discover the uses to which they put their transformed bodies.

Kate was a petite, red-haired woman whose hands moved with precise, sharp gestures like a symphony conductor while she talked. Although Kate attended AA meetings, she continued to drink throughout the period of my fieldwork. She described drinking as

magical and consistently wonderful. It puts on rose-colored glasses and everything is wonderful in those first hours, when it takes away feelings of anxiety and discomfort. Now I can talk, now I can interact, now I can approach you. I can respond to you.

How can we understand what Kate experiences with alcohol? From a neurochemical perspective, her experience amounts to the physical effects of ethanol. Intoxication is caused by alcohol’s action in the brain. Alcohol inhibits communication between neurons in the brain by acting

within the synapse, or the space that connects communicating neurons. Initially, alcohol targets certain neurotransmitter and neuromodulator sites in neural membranes in the synapse, which suppresses transmission activity. This leads to a cascade of indirect effects in juxtaposed neurons, either increasing or decreasing extracellular levels of a number of neurotransmitters, producing a hedonic impact and the typical behavioral effects of disinhibition and sedation (Roberto et al 2012, Vengeliene et al 2008).

The cessation of anxiety and subsequent relaxation that Kate experiences are certainly explainable by molecular means. However, she had more to say about why relaxation matters to her in the first place. She drank, she said, because she likes being social. I mentioned to her that in my observations of her while she was sober, she was quite friendly. She did not seem to have trouble approaching people and talking to them. She explained that

It's not just talking to people. It's being able to engage them and actually focus on them, ask about them, be interested in what they say, and probe into what's going on with them. It's not just willingness to talk, it opens me to someone else more emotionally. I can engage with another human being much more emotionally, intimately, and honestly, in a way that's simply palpably different than when I'm just me. I like that me that can engage with people that way, much better than I like the sober me. It's a better, more likable me.

Kate spoke of an acquaintance of hers that she admires. "She does what she wants, she goes where she wants, she knows what she wants to do, and she makes her life the way she wants it to be. Whatever she's got, I want some of it. I don't have any of that." When Kate is drinking, she can embody a little of this woman. Kate puts alcohol's physiological effects to achieve her goal of experiencing a quality of openness in talking to others. She aspires to be a particular kind of person who makes her life the way she wants it to be. It is not only the euphoric effects of alcohol that brings her pleasure. Kate's drinking affords her the pleasure of living, to some extent, her vision of human flourishing by enabling her to embody qualities of a "better me."

Evan, a young black man who was 23 when we met, was an aspiring writer. He drew attention from others even when he was not speaking, and his shares at meetings did not follow typical AA scripts. He had been sober for almost two years when we met. His drinking bore dire fruit much more rapidly than my other informants, within about three years during his college years. In the Introduction, I described what started his drinking—the practical matter of staying awake on a long drive.

Yet, he said, “It sort of continued from there. I always have nightmares, or night terrors that mostly revolved around Lorraine’s funeral, or dreams in which I was with Lorraine at her house, that sort of thing. I always woke up feeling very uncomfortable, very sad, and I didn’t want to dream, so I would drink until I passed out. So I didn’t have to see her.” He described Lorraine as “the woman I chose to be my mother versus my real mother.” She was close to Evan’s mother, who entrusted her to care for Evan and his older brother. Evan started going to her daycare when he was thirteen months old. He was quite precocious. He learned the alphabet and how to read soon after he started attending Lorraine’s daycare. He eventually skipped two grades in school. She taught Evan to read, write, do math, and cook. They were quite close; he said she treated him like he was her own son. His father beat them, with his brother taking most of the beatings. They lived in fear, Evan said. The only time they did not feel fear was when they were outside of their home, and never felt fear at Lorraine’s home. Both he and his older brother felt safe and loved there. They always asked their mother to allow them to stay a little longer when she came to pick them up and bring them home. Lorraine died when Even was ten.

His older brother began to physical abuse him after Lorraine’s death. His brother had been his playmate before then, and protected him when he could from their father’s anger. Evan wrote a poem about their relationship in an undated entry in his journal

We were brothers then,  
in the sticky heat,  
in the stucco landscape,  
in the Florida summers,  
we spent our days on the prowl,  
lizards and snakes our prey,  
prey he always caught, ~~that I never did~~ prey that I always lost  
we spent our nights on the courts,  
games of basketball against each other,  
games he always won,  
games I always lost  
he was the braver, stronger  
          smarter, wiser,  
          cooler, better of ~~the two of us~~ us  
I was his shadow  
we were brothers then  
and I was his shadow  
he led, he spoke,  
he wheeled and dealed  
and was all that I wasn’t

The heat was a vicious  
(can't stop, keep going)  
he's coming, keep moving  
you can hear him, belt in hand –  
the jingle of metal on metal,  
the thud of racing feet on wood.  
Left, slide on the tile,  
(can't slow down, keep moving)  
down the stairs, don't trip,  
leap down the last six steps,  
twist your ankle, don't stop,  
(almost safe, the bathroom, go.)  
shut the door, lock it (click)  
stool against the knob, his fists pound  
you can cry now, you can rest now  
(you're safe, wait it out)  
mom's almost home

from sunup to sundown,  
we hunted for lizards and  
a flash of gold  
i saw one, i yell  
get the box, brother says  
he knows, he runs,  
he's escaping.  
(don't let him get away)  
to the bush, he flees,  
safety there, shelter  
did you get him, brother again  
we never see golds, he says  
and I know that  
(if i lose it, he'll be angry)  
i make for the bush  
emergence, and i give chase  
he's too fast, bro i tell brother,  
you're too slow, reply  
he breaks my glasses,  
blood drips, i cry,  
it's my fault, he's never wrong

Evan felt that the abuse he experienced at the hands of his brother, and his father, combined with Lorraine's death, as the basis for his depression. Shortly after her death, he dreamed of her constantly, of being in her house and being taught by her. However, over time, "her constant

presence tormented more than it helped,” and he studied lucid dreaming, techniques to control the content of one’s dreams, so he would not have to wake up and lose her again every morning.

At the time he started drinking heavily about six times a week, he thought of himself “as a failure and waste of space.” He needed to drink so that he “wouldn’t have to feel anything. I didn’t have to feel anxious, shy, or angry.” He also drank so that he would not dream of Doreen. Evan was ambivalent about his ability to relate to people. When he told me of his awkwardness, I told him that he did not seem awkward at all in my observations of him socializing with others. He had also listed “social prowess” as one of his strengths in the journal he kept immediately after he stopped drinking in 2012. He explained that his problem was about women to whom he was attracted. When he wanted a woman, he felt worried, insecure, and panicky. However, after he drank, he had “swagger” and could talk to women.

### ***Being and ethics***

Ana was committed to being desirable; Kate, to being likable; and Evan, to having swagger. These purposes are not easily replaced by others, and they are persistent. The alcoholics I spoke with nearly all had an existential crisis when they stopped drinking. They struggled with the questions “Who am I?” and “How am I supposed to live?”, often using those very phrases. Jennifer grew up in a small west Texas town in which people of all ages got together and drank. She was the one her friends called every Friday to ask, “What’s going on? Where’s the party?” One of alcohol’s effects is to inhibit activity in the prefrontal cortex, which affects judgment. On some level, she said, she knew that would happen, and would drink so that she could approach men. When she stopped drinking, she had what she called an identity crisis. If she was not the girl who everyone called to find out where the party was, then who was she? Deborah said she is at a loss as to how to get along with her husband during their evenings together. When she was drinking to excess, she said, he took care of her. But without whiskey, without enjoying the blend she chose with discernment, without feeling its warmth spreading through her body, she said, “I can’t sit there and smile and listen to his boring stories. I feel so ungrateful to him.” Ian also used alcohol to stay married. He said, “The bottle was what held our marriage together. We could still be drinking buddies, even though we had nothing in common but the kids.” He said that they indeed had good times at parties they threw or listening to live music. His now ex-wife (who he said was not an alcoholic) opposed Ian getting sober when they

were married. At a dinner party when things became awkward between them, she said she didn't understand why he couldn't have one drink.

I referred to my informants' distress as existential crises because the nature of their existence was called into question, or the question of what it was for them to be. Given the nature of their crises, and the ways in which alcohol was interwoven into their daily lives and their sense of purpose, Heidegger's question of being is useful for exploring the role of drinking in their lives. "Being" refers to how the entities we encounter in the world are intelligible to us as entities at all. Humans are apparently the only entity for whom existence matters. We take a stance on the question, What is it to be? This is not an inward-focused project. Our being does not consist of representations inside our heads, but consists in our material engagements with people and objects in a shared world. The question of being – who we are, who we are going to be – permeates everyday life, and the concerns of everyday life permeate alcoholism as my informants experienced it.

In Heidegger's terminology, human existence can be described as a "thrown projection." In other words, humans are historical beings who may seize one of a number of possible ways to exist available to them in a specific time and place. The seizure of possibilities is an evaluative act, or one in which it is asked, "Is this good or bad?" This makes it an ethical act. These possibilities for existence are related to ground projects. When the means for my informants to pursue their purposes (alcohol) was taken away, they became bewildered.

Alcohol's physical effects explains, in part, the transformations my informants experienced. However, the neurochemistry is only the beginning of an active interpretive process, and does not adequately account for the ways in which entities in different domains – namely, the drinker, alcohol, social context, and cultural systems of meaning – form linkages with each other. Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world makes those linkages explicit. There are three features of being within the phrase being-in-the-world. 1) Being: humans are open to and pursue various possibilities of how to exist in the world. 2) Humans are always already in concrete, historical situations in which we pursue possibilities for existence. 3) Humans are among other entities, both human and non-human. The possible projects we may pursue depends upon the ways in which the entities around us are intelligible to us. The linkages we have with other entities in the world are links of meaning.

What kind of entity is alcohol to my informants? Alcohol is intelligible as a kind of entity based upon their purposes. Our fundamental relationship with objects in the world is not as meaning-making subjects confronting meaningless objects, the Cartesian view that still lingers in biomedical views of addiction. My informants' relationship to alcohol is better understood as a relationship with tools. Our fundamental relationship to objects is that of absorbed, practical engagement with tools to fulfill specific purposes in everyday life. The utility of tools is not dependent solely on the usefulness we as subjects impute to them; their utility is also dependent on their physical characteristics.<sup>9</sup> Using alcohol as a tool gives rise to another tool, an alcohol-transformed body.

### ***Signs: materiality, mood, and meaning***

Ana took herself to be desirable and Deborah considered herself a good wife; are these not alcoholic delusions? They are not simply overlaying their subjective interpretations on objective neurochemical activity. In other words, their interpretations are not arbitrary, but based on the material qualities of the physiological effects of alcohol. The examples I shared demonstrate how ethical questions such as "What kind of person should I be?" are caught up in physiology. The question is, How does something like Ana's relaxed muscles come to mean something? To delineate exact relations of meaning, it is useful to think of meaning in terms of signs, or as a semiotic process. What is needed is a way to demonstrate how alcohol generates qualities that we can take as signs. Peirce's semiotics tends to be about sensing external objects (Bernstein 1964, Neshar 2002), or exteroception. My analysis here involves interoception, or the sensing of the physiological condition of the body. Interoception includes sensations such as temperature, itch, tickle, and muscle tension (Craig 2002, 2009).<sup>10</sup> I am introducing interoceptive phenomena into Peircean semiotics. How do our internal, physiological states become vehicles for meaning? People have access to the material qualities of the physical effects of alcohol, and they interpret these and put them to use in a social context. Due to its chemical makeup, alcohol induces sedative and anxiety-reducing effects. These relaxing and disinhibitory effects lend

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<sup>9</sup> Entities such as tools exist independently of our meaning-making activities. Although Heidegger may be quoted at length as to the reality of the external world, for my purposes here I will include this short quote: "Entities *are*, quite independently of the experience by which they are disclosed, the acquaintance in which they are discovered, and the grasping in which their nature is ascertained" (Heidegger 1962, 228; emphasis original).

<sup>10</sup> There is research in neuroscience on the relationship between interoception and addiction as it relates to arousal, attention, stress, reward, conditioning, emotional experience, and decision-making (e.g., Naqvi and Bechara 2010, Paulus and Stewart 2014, Verjedo-Garcia et al 2012).

themselves to particular kinds of purposes, so there will be similarities in ways in which my informants found alcohol useful. Having one's anxiety quelled does not automatically lead to dance improvisation. To understand how bodily states take on specific meaning, it is necessary to analyze how they are taken up into interpretive processes.

Ana went to Argentina to study with master tango teachers. She was therefore quite informed about the subtleties of body posture that mark a truly good dancer from a mediocre one. As with Ian and the lambics, she went through a learning process and learned how authorities on dance typify a good dancer as opposed to "So what?" dancers. She tended to notice her techniques that were not up to the experts' standards, even when other tango dancers told her how good she is. She looked at photos of herself and found evidence of subpar technique. Her concern about proper form, and her knowledge of her past mistakes, generated an anxious mood prior to dancing. Yet a drink loosened both her body and her head quickly and easily. Prior to drinking, dancing was rife with the possibilities of making mistakes and looking inelegant. Alcohol's sedative effects have any of a number of qualities, yet in her mood she picked out a quality of "looseness." This mood altered the signs that enter her particular stream of semiosis. What she *cared about* was altered. The interoceptive data that are relevant to completing the tango set changed. Her attention was drawn away from the exact position of her feet. She was attuned to how her partner's movements affect her body, and to the sounds of the music entering her ears. The interpretant picked out qualities within these interoceptive data as relevant to forming sign-relations. They became affordances for improvisation.

The embellishments she performs to the music and her partner's movements are what set her apart from other dancers. She is not a "So what?" dancer. People watching her admired her, and her partner is grateful that she makes them look good. Ana's assessment of her improved dancing skills was not delusional. Alcohol's physical effects exhibited material qualities that are available to her and to others for evaluation. Other dancers' multiple requests for her as a partner ratified her self-assessment. A good friend of hers who has been in AA for decades told her that if she were serious about sobriety, she should quit dancing. Ana flatly refused to quit dancing because she said she had no guarantee her life would get better if she stopped, and she would be giving up a great deal of pleasure.

Kate said that other people probably would not notice much difference from when she was drinking and when she was not. Only she could perceive her changed interoceptive states.

Alcohol induces physical relaxation, reducing stress and feelings of discomfort. Alcohol also stimulates the release of endorphins, the body's internal opiates. The release of these endorphins is what runners call "runner's high" or "an endorphin rush." Hence the mood she calls "rose-colored glasses": whatever she encounters in the world is wonderful, including people. She ordinarily has trouble engaging with people, with caring about them. But with her change in mood, her affective orientation to people changes. The people she talks to exhibit all manner of qualia, but the rose-colored mood picks out the interesting ones. She enjoys her interactions with them. This is indexical of a type of person: a likeable person.

I asked Evan to describe how alcohol typically affected him when he drank at bars. Prior to alcohol taking effect, he said his muscles would be tense throughout his body. He felt he spoke too fast. He could not make eye contact and his voice trembled. He was aware of a rapid heartbeat, and he felt "very self conscious and fearful of how I presented myself." But most of all, he had a feeling of a difference in speed between himself and the world. He said, "I feel like my thoughts are too fast, like everything else is in slow motion and I'm frantically in action." At the same time, he heard a sound like static in his ears. "It would feel like there was too much going on, everything was too fast and too loud." But after taking a drink, he said, everything slowed down. "I didn't feel my heart pounding, didn't hear the noise in my head, my muscles loosened up." He found that after drinking, he felt more confident, so he went to more public places. He called himself a "jovial drunk." He said, "I was actually pretty funny. When I wasn't overwhelmed with anxiety, I had great comedic timing and a real sharp wit." He felt more attractive due to his success at flirtation and hook-ups. He said he used to have swagger, but when he stopped drinking, he lost it. When we first started speaking, he spoke a great deal about his problems with women.

As mentioned earlier, in a situation in which he wanted to talk to a woman he was attracted to, his mood was one of worry, insecurity, and panic. His mood was generated by signs in that situation, the presence of the woman, his thoughts, but it also influenced the generation of further signs. He had worried thoughts about his self-presentation. It is not self-evident that the physical signs Evan described would be perceived or signify insecurity. As Goodman (1972) pointed out, any object has any number of qualities. What qualities the interpreter notices and interprets are context-dependent. It depends on mood, on what a person cares about. Another man may have his attention focused solely on the woman in the situation and the signs she is

generating, and not notice tense muscles and elevated heart rate or that he is talking faster than usual. Perhaps another man has just taken cocaine prior to seeing the woman, picks out the same qualia Evan did, but for him the bodily signs are indexes of pleasurable excitement. But in Evan's mood, he cared about the particular qualia he picked out of the interoceptive states of his body, and became highly aware of them. He interpreted his bodily signs as indexical of a type of person, a person with no swagger. The interoceptive states he experienced had any number of qualia, but the one he picked up was speed, which he described as "frantically in action." This he interpreted as indexical of his difference from the world.

Alcohol provided an immediate solution. His muscles relaxed, his heart slowed. When the body relaxes, stress is reduced. He stopped hearing the static in his ears, and he "slowed down." His body was no longer indexical of a person with no swagger. The prefrontal cortex is for thinking and planning, and alcohol inhibits that. His attention is not taken up by worried, insecure interoceptive states, and he is no longer thinking about self-presentation. He becomes a jovial person. Women responded to this, and hooked up with him. His bodily state while drinking became indexical to him of a person with swagger. Again, another person might find the sensations of their body slowing down as unpleasant, as the ending of a party, perhaps. But for Evan, the sedative effects of alcohol enabled him to become a token of a valorized masculine type. The sedative effects of alcohol enabled Deborah to become a token of a valorized feminine type. As she sat in her chair in the evenings at home with her husband, Deborah's body displayed qualities such as stillness and smiling as her husband talked. In actuality, her body did not move much because of the effects of the alcohol, and she was smiling at her own relaxed thoughts, but this did not matter. In American culture, "good spouse" as a category or type has certain characteristics, two of which are being there for each other and reciprocating care. Deborah's husband took care of her when she drank too much. Being still and smiling in her chair as her husband talks about things he cares about is a way for her to be there for him. Thus, her bodily states indexed the kind of person both Deborah and her husband took her to be: a good wife. They both interpreted the other as a token of the type "good spouse." Deborah found her desire to be a good wife ratified by her husband's interpretation of her behavior. The qualia that Evan and Deborah embodied were lost when they stopped drinking. Evan told me of his struggles learning to relate with women while sober, and Deborah felt ungrateful to her husband.

The previous examples illustrated how alcohol is a tool for inhabiting valorized social categories, but it may also serve as a tool for transitioning between ethical ground projects. Emma had aspired to be an actor since she was 12. In her teenage years, she had parts as an extra in movies. She planned to move to New York when she was 18 and go to an acting conservatory. She accomplished this, and eventually got speaking roles. She said, “I went into my twenties being really, like, I have to do this; by this age, I have to have that. All my responsibilities came before fun.” Some of her milestones of success in life were to become a successful actor before 25 and to become financially comfortable and living in a nice house by 30. She explained that while in school, she always made straight A’s, and she continued to get up early and maintained a regimented schedule. Up through her mid-twenties, she paid her bills before doing anything else with her money to maintain good credit. She said, “I was a very in control person to the point that people didn’t like me. My friends [told] me, ‘You need to let go. You need to relax. You’re so uptight. You’re always so upset or worried about things. You need to just live your life.’” While she was married and living in LA, she exercised about four hours a day with one day off per week. She started with a long run on the beach. After stopping to eat something healthy like brown rice, turkey burger patties, and steamed broccoli, she went to the gym for two hours. She said, “I had gotten to where I was really happy with my body. I was muscular, but I was thin, too.” Other than the gym, she focused on other aspects of her appearance. She said she was “obsessed” with shopping for clothes because she was finally happy with how she looked in them. Because her husband made a lot of money, she would shop at Urban Outfitters a couple times a week. She also spent time in other aspects of grooming, like getting her brows waxed. The people around her reacted to her appearance with admiration. She mentioned being spotted by a Levi’s modeling scout on the Santa Monica promenade, who told her, “Do you want to model for Levi’s? You have a great body, you look great in Levi’s.” While she enjoyed being told these things, she turned the job down because as an actor, she was above modeling jobs.

Emma emphasized the importance of paid bills. She had a disposition she described as “in control” and “responsible.” Paying bills was not just a practical matter of survival for her. Paid bills are indexically linked to a type of person. A person with paid bills has good credit. A person with good credit can achieve the good life and have a “nice” house. When an envelope arrives in the mail, Emma is disposed to pay attention to what sort of envelope it is, and if it is a bill, she notices its quality of being unpaid. She could dismiss the envelope as trash or hide the

bill in a pile on the dining room table and pretend it does not exist. Yet for her, paid bills were indexical of the type of person she wanted to be, and thus were a tool for-the-sake-of that purpose. Yet her friends typified her as uptight. Emma used her body as a tool as well. Certain types of bodies and faces – like those of Emma’s – are more likely to be found in the world of acting. Just as desks, podiums, and screens populate university classrooms, symmetrical female faces and thin muscular female bodies populate films. Emma’s orientation to her body resembles her orientation to bills. She had a rigorous exercise, eating, and grooming regimen to shape her body into a tool. Her thinness and muscularity instantiate valued qualia in her industry of female desirability, but for her they indexed a responsible, disciplined, successful person. The systems of references – credit scores, thin bodies in film – are social and historical. That Emma uses bills and her body as tools in pursuit of success do not originate from some inner depth, and her assessment of herself as successful in obtaining a good credit score and thin body are not her individual meanings imposed on those objects. Shared, non-idealist features of the world in being-in-the-world makes it possible to avoid subjectivism and analyze Emma’s experience in terms of public, historical meanings.

Acting opportunities died out as she got older. She also divorced her husband of seven years when she was 25. Her husband worked in the film industry and made a good deal of money, and after the divorce, she moved out of their house and her income plummeted. Her position was that of the man described by Bernard Williams who lost his ground projects. As she described herself at this time,

I was suicidal. I felt like a failure in my career. I didn’t have money. In my mid-20s, I felt old to be working at a restaurant still. I was also in fear of getting older because I’m in a profession, acting, where the clock is ticking. You have to do it when you’re young, because when you’re older no one is going to hire you. My looks I felt like were so important and I was depressed if I didn’t look the right way. I worked in Santa Monica, which is a beach community of LA that’s very wealthy, so I got to see all these people who had what I wanted, and I was having to work so much just to get by. I’m never going to get what I want, so I might as well say Fuck it. I was bartending, so it was very convenient. We were allowed to drink behind the bar. That was when I started to really crave being drunk and just wanted to let everything go.

Bernard Williams stated that meaning is lost when one’s ground projects are lost. In Heidegger’s terms, the systems of references that comprised Emma’s world ceased to hang together; the world in her being-in-the-world essentially fell apart.

Emma said that she had never had a group of friends, just individual friends she saw one on one. Around the time she started drinking, she “met a bunch of alcoholics.” As she described herself and her new friends, they were young, living in LA, and good-looking. They worked in creative fields as musicians, actors, writers, or photographers. They went to places that were “the next big thing,” lounged by pools, or went to the beach to have a bonfire, always with lots of alcohol. Emma made about \$200 a night as a bartender. Whereas before she would fulfill her responsibilities before having fun, she was now spending \$600 a night, vowing to make up for that amount by working more the next week. Prior to this time in her life, she rarely drank. When she started drinking, money and her body entered new systems of reference. Her mood, generated by both her changed circumstances and intersubjectively with her friends, was “Fuck it.” Alcohol went from something to be avoided to something to be indulged in daily. While before money was for bills, after starting to drink, money was something to be spent as fast as possible.

She continued to pay close attention to her appearance during her early days of drinking:

I would have some whiskey to get me relaxed, then I’d put makeup on. Probably change my clothes like five times and play music. I would look forward all day to that. Because I had that anxiety, I would drink that whiskey and it would go away. “Oh, look how pretty I am. How many different ways can I look pretty.” That became a ritual. Everyone always saw me in jeans, and when I’d dress up they’d be like, “Wow!” That was always exciting. That would make me high. I remember it made me so high I would be shaking. That feeling of someone noticing I was pretty. They’d be like, “You look amazing! You look like a movie star! You’re the prettiest girl here!” I remember one time, I was there with this guy who broke up with me, I was in the bathroom with this woman who represented all these models in LA. I was crying. She was like, “Why are *you* upset? You’re *so* beautiful.” That made me feel good.

I asked her how she felt when she drank. She said,

We were all drinking whiskey on the rocks. Every night, I would have six or seven of those. The whiskey, almost like coffee, made me hyper. Excited.<sup>11</sup> All that stuff [about her career ending] went away. I could talk to people. I felt funny. I felt pretty.

After the world in her being-in-the-world collapsed, alcohol changed Emma’s disposition from being “uptight” to relaxation and excitement. This allowed her to use her body as a tool for

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<sup>11</sup> Alcohol may have stimulant effects at the lower end of blood alcohol levels (Chi and de Wit 2013, Davidson et al 2002). Thus, Emma likened whiskey’s effects to coffee. In addition, Evan said that part of his transition toward frequent heavy drinking began with the problem of keeping awake during frequent, hours-long drives between his college town and his home town. Coffee and cigarettes did not keep him awake, but drinking beer did.

different purposes. Previously, the thinness of her body and her facial beauty were relevant qualia, but they entered semiosis for-the-sake-of building an acting career. After she began drinking, those qualia were still relevant, but placed in a different system of reference. Her body became something for-the-sake-of being beautiful and displayed in glamorous public settings beyond her financial means. Alcohol moved money and her body out of a system of reference centered upon control. Alcohol makes associations possible between embodied qualities, cultural meanings, and ethical projects to become a kind of person. My informants continued to drink in the face of negative consequences because it is difficult to replace or abandon such a potent tool.

### *Habit and Hybridity*

Much has been written about alcoholic drinking as a pathological lack of self-control that precludes active engagement with life. More work is needed that addresses how alcoholics use alcohol to live life. This chapter presents cases in which people used alcohol as a tool for maximizing self-fulfillment. They all had an instrumental orientation to alcohol with a view toward self-improvement. As such, they were not the stereotypical isolated, delusional alcoholic. Their efforts produced results. Ana could quickly and easily be distinguished as a good dancer by expert standards. Kate enjoyed talking to people and liked herself for doing so. Evan was a man with swagger popular with women, and Deborah was a good wife. Emma became tired of being so controlled when it produced no results, and so became a beautiful, fun-loving denizen of LA with a new boyfriend thanks to alcohol. Alcohol worked for them, allowed them to fulfill their vision of a good life.

This chapter is an initial step in exploring the implications of the usefulness of alcohol as a tool for realizing ethical projects to be particular kinds of people. I draw from Heidegger's phenomenology the insight that the pursuit of possible ways of existing as a human being is perhaps as fundamental as the biological imperatives of survival and reproduction. While much insight may be gained by studying alcohol's effects on drinkers on a cellular or molecular level, I observed that my informants' primary relationship with alcohol was to use it as a tool in a social context, and this use played a role in constituting their sense of themselves as particular kinds of people. Alcohol enabled new relations of meaning to form between my informants' transformed bodies, objects, and other people in a social setting. A semiotic analysis of the formation of these novel relations of meaning demonstrates that my informants are not merely delusional or "in

denial” about their alcoholism. Combined with a phenomenological emphasis on mood, a Peircean semiotic approach addresses the materiality of their experience of drinking. Interpretation of experience is not something that occurs solely inside the head.

Semiotic processes are potentially infinite, and regularities may emerge from interpretants over time. The final interpretant is a disposition to behave in particular ways produced by the regularity with which sign-vehicles – in this case, the effects of drinking – mediate behavior. This is what Peirce calls a “habit-change,” or “modification of a person’s tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experience or from previous exertions of his will or acts” (Lee 1997, Liszka 1990, Singer 1980). With respect to addiction, Valverde (1998) discusses the promise of habit as an analytic. Habit deconstructs the binaries between will vs. impulse and freedom vs. determination that characterize much contemporary thinking about addiction. Valverde states that the effects of habit are “to conserve energy and set up a chain of repetitions by transforming a once impulsive or willed action into second nature” (1998:37). This approach provides a way out of the moral dilemma of classifying addiction as the result of choice or disease. Alcohol enabled my informants to perform new meaningful habits. It allowed them to participate in new forms of sociality. To understand alcoholics’ motivation to continue drinking despite negative consequences, it may be fruitful to further investigate how these semiotic linkages become durable as habitual comportment over time.

Drinking was practical. It helped my informants live everyday life, whether as good spouses or desirable men and women. The end point of alcoholism, when their lives center around thinking about alcohol, obtaining it, and drinking it, does not characterize the entirety of their experience. Drinking helped them do things—it was not a “time out” or domain separate from “normal” activities. Rather than being merely pathological, drinking helped them achieve social goals at some point in their drinking trajectory. My discussion of alcohol as a tool differs from Actor-Network accounts of objects. Latour (1999) describes how subjects and objects may form collectives that engage in novel actions. He discusses the implications of two statements regarding gun control: “Guns kill people,” and the NRA’s reply that “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” The first statement implies that a good citizen becomes a criminal on account of having a gun in her hand. The second statement implies that the gun is simply a “*neutral* carrier of will that *adds nothing* to the action, playing the role of a passive conductor” (1998, 177; emphasis original). Latour argues that action is not something that resides with agent

1, the citizen, or agent 2, the gun. Instead, agent 3 emerges: a “gun-citizen” that is a “composite agent” or “hybrid actor.” The gun-citizen is a different person. Perhaps she only intended to injure, but with a gun in her hand, her intent shifts to killing. The action of killing is something agent 1 and agent 2 produce together.

Actor-Network Theory provides a compelling account of the distributed nature of human actions, but it does not provide an adequate basis for understanding of how a particular subjectivity forms. Alcohol’s action within the body is a mode of subject-formation as it engenders links between bodily states, ethical aspirations, desired character traits, and valued social roles. I use “hybrid” in a different manner than Latour. Using alcohol as a tool did not prove to be a sustainable strategy for my informants. Over time, alcohol was no longer a separate tool they could pick up and then put down when it was no longer useful. Instead, they became hybridized with it. Its utility persisted even after its effects began to block or sabotage ground projects. Alcohol became necessary for them to exist at all, even as it enabled self-destruction.<sup>12</sup> When approached this way, rather than a discrete biological disorder, addiction may be seen as a potentially destructive set of relations between bodies, alcohol, ethical projects to become a kind of person, and concrete engagements with people and objects in a social world.

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<sup>12</sup> In an adaptation of Heidegger’s terminology, alcoholics may be thought of as prostheticized Dasein.

## CHAPTER III

### **Stopping Drinking: Problematization and American Personhood**

The previous chapter dealt with the “it works” part of “it works until it doesn’t.” This chapter investigates the latter half. At this point, alcoholics have become hybridized with their alcohol tool. This may be explained with an analogy using Heidegger’s go-to example of a tool, a hammer. People usually put down the hammer after they are finished with it. An alcoholic is like a person whose hand becomes fused with the hammer, forming a hammer-hand. After hammering nails into boards to build the house, the alcoholic continues using her hammer-hand, and starts smashing drywall and windows. If she notices her hammer-hand is not working as it used to, she may step back, stop, and problematize the situation. Yet, because the hammer is a part of her, has become part of her purpose in life, it is no easy task to stop and separate from it. The questions that this chapter raises are as follows. When do people step back from their drinking? What existing categories of problems do they use to problematize their drinking? What motivates them to stay stopped?

Regarding the first question, AA’s theory is that alcoholics stop drinking when they “hit bottom.” The literature defines this as being “really licked” and hopeless. In the early days of AA, the founders sought to help people who had fallen quite low from ideals and could relate to a sense of felt degradation. Yet, when AA received favorable press, younger people and people who still had homes, jobs, and families began coming to meetings. The fellowship had to “raise the bottom” and accept them (Kurtz 1979). One definition of hitting bottom I heard in meetings was “receiving the gift of desperation.” As explained in the Introduction, our orientation to the world and its objects is affective. Whether we engage with objects depends upon whether we care about them or not, and how we engage with them also depends on our mood. A perduring mood of desperation, degradation, or hopelessness could lead alcoholics to disengage with alcohol, thus opening the possibility for engagement with other objects. Yet there is confusion over what it means to hit bottom. Did a particular experience count as hitting bottom? Does one need to keep drinking until a bottom is hit? How bad do things have to get? Sometimes, these

questions are settled by the slogan “Your bottom is when you decide to stop digging.” The questions that the bottom theory raises suggests that a mood of desperation and degradation does not by itself provide sufficient motivation to stop.

Is stopping a result of what Jarrett Zigon calls “moral breakdowns”? These breakdowns occur when “dilemmas, difficult times, and troubles do arise from time to time and they force one – again, often without any or a very minor part played by the individuals involved – to step-away and figure out, work-through and deal with the situation-at-hand” (2007, 137). During a moral breakdown, an individual is jolted out of their normally unconscious, “everyday” moral state into conscious reflection. But this does not necessarily accord with the experience of my informants. Their drinking experiences do not sound like unproblematized, unreflexive everydayness. Not all identified as alcoholic, but many did think about how, when, where, and with whom they drank. Some deliberately chose as companions people who drank as much as they did, so they would not have to hear complaints about their drinking. They were also aware that their drinking produced consequences. Problematizing their behavior was not neither rare nor exceptional in their day-to-day lives. As Keane (2016, 135) states, “people’s capacities for reflection, criticism, and even alienation are also ubiquitous parts of human life and should not be treated as rare or peculiar. Ethics is not all of one order. Sometimes people are in the midst of the action; sometimes they seem to stand apart from it.” Caroline Knapp, in her memoir *Drinking: A Love Story*, wrote that

Active alcoholism is such a demeaning state. Some part of you, the part that resists denial, acts as the observer, quietly aware. I’d look at myself in the mirror some nights and I’d sense that observer staring back, loathing what she saw: a depressed, anxious, self-sabotaging thirty-four-year-old woman who could not seem to get out of her own way (1996, 231).

The gambling addicts Natalie Schull met also reflected upon their behavior and provided insightful commentary on their predicaments. One of them shared a description that referred to a part of herself able to take a third-person perspective on herself, as in Knapp’s quote above: “Even as part of one’s mind is hopelessly lost to it, lurking in the background is a part that is sharp and aware of what is going on but seems unable to do much to help” (2012, 24). Rather than focus on a moment, such as bottom or breakdown, this chapter will look at stopping drinking as a process.

A common response to both of the questions I posed in the introductory paragraph frames the issue as medicalization, a process in which formerly immoral or criminal behaviors become medical conditions and fall under the purview of experts. Yet scholars describe the medicalization of alcoholism as “incomplete” (Tracy 2005) or “failed” (Roizen 2004). Some deny that alcoholism is a disease at all (Fingarette 1998, Heyman 2009), and public opinion remains ambivalent (Valverde 1998). “War on Drugs” rhetoric is unsympathetic to it. While there are specialty addiction clinics, both public and private, alcohol-related problems have not been fully integrated into America’s mainstream medical and mental health institutional systems (Roizen 2004). Diagnosis and treatment are not dominated by experts (Appleton 1995, Tracy 2005), and in any case, the majority of addicts recover without seeking formal medical treatment (J. Arroyo, pers comm, 2010). Treatment is not completely medical. It combines clinical practice, AA’s twelve steps, spirituality, and self-help manuals (Valverde 1998; S. Mompert, pers comm, 2011). Among alcoholism researchers, there is no agreed-upon phenotype or etiology (Robinson and Berridge 2003, Zucker et al 2006; D. Wendt, personal communication, 2011), or that it even has a specific brain physiology (Berke 2003).

The people in two of the ethnographic examples in this chapter did problematize their behavior in medical terms. Yet, in those examples and the others, the problematization included a range of problem categories. Studying addiction illuminates multiple aspects of American personhood. People were concerned about issues such as their ability to make choices, the qualities that makes one a good person, and definitions of suffering and well-being. This chapter contains two sections: 1) the historical transformations that enabled alcoholics to problematize themselves in the first place, and 2) ethnographic examples of problematization. I will group the ethnographic cases into five categories: 1) an activity I call “addict math,” a way in which informants tried to exercise a sense of control over their drinking based upon quantitative, risk management practices; 2) problematization prompted by medical authority; 3) legal coercion and choice; 4) concerns about authenticity; and 5) the introduction of new systems of reference.

### ***Historical and Personal Transformations***

Alcoholism is a hybrid object comprised of medical, political, capitalist, moral, and religious concerns. At stake are kinds of people and whether those kinds of people can produce

proper social relations, whether domestic, productive, gender, or familial, or relations between self and God, and community and God. Its existence as a social category that serves as a basis for personal transformation requires an examination of the social transformations that enabled its emergence.

For an extended period of history, drunkenness was the vice of intemperance. Given the influence of Greek virtues on Christian thought, I will include Aristotle's description of intemperance here. Intemperance involves bodily pleasures – eating, drinking, and sex – that all humans share, being animals. These pleasures are therefore brutish. Intemperate people enjoy things they should not, and enjoy things it is right to enjoy more than most people do. They are more pained than they ought to be when they do not get pleasant things. Insensible people are the opposite of intemperate people in that they do not enjoy bodily pleasures at all. Temperate people are the mean<sup>13</sup> between intemperate and insensible people. They do not enjoy things it is wrong to enjoy, do not enjoy pleasure to excess, and do not feel pain in the absence of pleasures. They enjoy pleasant things it is proper to enjoy as correct reason prescribes. The temperate person's appetite is for the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, in the right amount. Intemperance is reprehensible because it is voluntary. Temperance or intemperance is acquired through activity, and one may choose among different pleasures. Aristotle applies intemperance to the case of children because they are irrational and live in accordance with appetite. He describes intemperate people as "slavish" (*NE* 1118a-1119b).

Christian theology adopted the vice or sin of intemperance. The influential Puritan ministers and authors Increase and Cotton Mather preached that drink was a "Good creature of God," and that people should not waste or abuse God's gift. God gave all humans the ability to resist temptation and seek salvation of their own free will, and drunkenness amounted to the sin of intemperance. Cotton Mather wrote that drunkenness was a source of threats to social hierarchy, a divine affliction, and would result in eternal damnation (Rorabaugh 1979). This influenced colonials' views. Colonials disapproved of belligerent public drunkenness and "habitual drunkards," who were seen as guilty of the sin of intemperance. The colonials felt that this sin led drunkards to ignore their economic, religious, and family duties. Therefore, they used

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle's virtues are not a literal mean, but are triadic. They are placed in reference to two opposing qualities. In the temperance example, it is brutish to enjoy bodily pleasures most of all, but rather inhuman to be deficient in these bodily pleasures, to feel no enjoyment at all. One's appetites should be for the right things, at the right time, in the right amount, etc.

moral suasion, licensing, and laws to control drinking. Clergymen and prominent citizens condemned intemperance and labeled taverns as pests to society (Levine 1978, Rorabaugh 1979).

Influential thinkers in the eighteenth century addressed the problem of drunkenness. In addition to the health and social problems it created, they expressed concern about the freedom of individuals. In his tract *Freedom of the Will* 1754, New England theologian Jonathan Edwards used the example of drunkenness as an example of how the will is not completely free because there are motives and causes for what we do. However, our actions are free because we might have done otherwise. He wrote that drunkards drink under the power of a love and violent appetite for drink. But at the same time, they are aggrieved at the prospect of poverty and other outcomes of drunkenness, and so may desire the virtue of temperance. Yet, they still act voluntarily in drinking. Thus, although some actions are not consciously chosen because they are produced by habit, habits are nevertheless the accumulations of freely chosen actions, so we are responsible for them. The way AA people talk about “choice” resembles Edwards’ views on habit (Valverde 1998), an issue I will explore further in Gabriel’s story later in this chapter.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, alcohol shifted from being described as a “good creature of God” into a dangerous thing. In 1774, Anthony Benezet, a Philadelphia abolitionist, Quaker businessman, and reformer published a pamphlet declaring that distilled spirituous liquors were not a “good creature of God,” but a “mighty destroyer” that weakens faculties and the body, heightens the passions, and depraves morals. This concerned him because only men free to be their own masters and exercise self-control, moderation, and reason can govern themselves. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, expressed concern about not only the deaths caused by spirits, but also about the sort of government “intemperate and corrupt” men might vote into power. Ardent spirits were “the great destroyer” not only of individuals and their families, but the United States as well (Rush 1819). The control of passion by reason has been an issue of critical importance in the development of Western political thought. Behaviors that arose from unthinking habit or the passions were inimical to the creation of free political institutions. Self-control was a moral imperative (Howe 1997).

Rush was influential through his publications and position of instructor at the Philadelphia School of Medicine. The temperance movement in the next century claimed him as its founder (Blocker 1989). Rush wrote that “ardent spirits,” or distilled spirits, were the problem, and people should try healthful fermented beverages instead. He described drunkenness

as hereditary, but also emphasized habit. Drunkenness was a disease induced by vice: “No man ever became suddenly a drunkard. It is by gradually accustoming the taste and stomach to ardent spirits...that men have been led to love them in their more destructive mixtures and in their simple state.” He recommended remedies for drunkenness such as a severe whipping, bleeding, belief in Christian doctrine, shame and guilt, and taking an oath. He performed an early experiment in operant conditioning. He claimed to have cured a drunkard by putting an emetic in his liquor: “the association of the idea of ardent spirits with a painful or disagreeable impression upon some part of the body.” In Lockean fashion, he explained this as an “appeal to the operations of the human mind, which obliges it to associate ideas, accidentally or otherwise combined, for the cure of vice.” He suggested changing the habits of drunkards:

Our knowledge of this principle of association upon the minds and conduct of men, should lead us to destroy, by means of other impressions, the influence of all those circumstances, with which the recollection and desire of spirits is combined. Some men drink only in the *morning*, some at *noon*, and some at *night*. Some men drink only on a *market day*, some at *one* tavern only, and some in only in *one kind* of company. Now by finding a new and interesting employment, or subject of conversation for drunkards at the usual times in which they have been accustomed to drink, and by restraining them by the same means from those places and companions, which suggested to them the idea of ardent spirits, their habits of intemperance may be completely destroyed.

This advice would not be out of place in modern treatment therapeutics.

People during colonial times singled out drunkards as problematic, but did not consider them as a troublesome category of deviants. They did not conceive of drunkenness as a removable social defect, nor alcohol as a dangerous substance (Blocker 1989, Levine 1978, Rothman 1971). Drunk and disorderly conduct was punished through fines, whippings, or the stocks (Earle 1900, Krout 1925, Levine 1978). In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were a number of reform movements to improve social conditions by establishing institutions such as prison, reform schools, orphanages, insane asylums, and tuberculosis sanatoria. However, drunkards ended up in the almshouse, jail, or workhouse. By mid-century, reform efforts resulted in private inebriate “homes” that provided room, board, and moral reformation. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the number of private sanatoria that catered to wealthy clients increased, and urban rescue missions, such as Salvation Army, appeared. The first inebriate facility run by medical professionals opened in New York in 1864. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin also had

state inebriate asylums (White 1998). Some inebriate asylums accepted women, and a few was established for women inebriates, but most did not accept them (McClellan 2000)

Temperance was a mass, diverse social reform movement that lasted for over a century. It had the support of much of the population throughout that time. In addition to addressing the social damage caused by drinking, the movement touched upon major issues in American life: social mobility, economic development, family structure, gender roles, immigration, social order and welfare, the role of the state in effecting social change, and political corruption, particularly in association with stigmatized groups such as the Irish. In commercializing, industrializing America, drunkenness represented qualities people hoped to eradicate from themselves and their society: irrationality, instability, self-indulgence, dependence, disorderliness, and loss of self-control. In the early 1800s, even before the abolition movement, reformers referred to drink as “enslaving” (Dannenbaum 1984). People in the nineteenth century emphasized the importance of character (Howe 1997), and drunkards were a contradistinction to the disciplined, self-made man (Tracy 2005).

In the 1820s and 1830s, the American Temperance Society formed in Massachusetts and New York for total abstinence. They hoped to persuade already temperate to abstinence, rather than reclaim drunks. Their philosophy was that the danger in drinking arose from a combination of human weakness and a dangerous substance. Because of frailty in the face of temptation, people needed to publically pledge to commit to abstinence and needed the fellowship of the temperance society to help them keep their pledge. Their membership included “African” chapters, women, and people of many occupations. By 1835, the ATS had 1.5 million members, about 12% of free population of U.S. (Blocker 1989). Millions continued to participate after the dissolution of the ATS. After several waves of temperance movements, toward the end of the century, women sought to ensure the welfare of women and children. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), founded in 1874, sought legal solution to family problems caused by drunkenness. It dominated the dry movement since its founding. The WTCU framed their campaign against alcohol and saloons as “home protection,” highlighting the suffering of women and children due to alcohol-induced abuse and neglect. The American public probably received most of its information on the social problems caused by alcohol from the WCTU. It even won congressional approval for anti-alcohol education in American high schools. Women temperance reformers redefined what respectable masculinity was. Respectable men not only provided for

their family, but wanted to spend time with them (Bordin 1990, Rotskoff 2002). Prohibition was the majority sentiment (McClellan 2000). Prior to the passage of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, states passed prohibition laws. In 1851, Maine passed the first, and eleven states followed, although some were repealed. More popular were “local option” laws, in which counties or towns elected to go “dry” and prohibit sales of alcohol, or remain “wet” (Blocker 1989).

Outside of the temperance movement, the first social movement of drunkards reforming fellow drunkards was formed during the depression in late 1830s. The Washingtonian movement was founded in Baltimore by unemployed artisans. They avoided the moralistic tone of the temperance movement. Their program consisted of “experience sharing” of debauchery and reform at meetings, commitment to sobriety, material assistance to each other, and service to other inebriates. There was also a group for women, the Martha Washingtonians. The movement spread rapidly through the northeast and midwest, but none remained after 1847 except in Boston and Chicago, where homes for inebriates continued to run. It is estimated that the one in Boston treated 10,000 people by the end of the century. The Washingtonians were succeeded by fraternal temperance societies also founded by drunkards to reform other drunkards, including separate black societies and those that included women (White 1998).

The temperance movement produced a voluminous literature. Temperance narratives helped shape popular and professional opinions about alcoholism, and were so popular that even people who did not care about temperance reform were familiar with the story elements (Tracy 2005). The motifs of temperance literature as a whole were domestic violence, self-destructiveness, shame and guilt, deviance, and futility (O’Reilly 1997). “Drunkard narratives” appeared in the 1830s and remained popular throughout the century. There were key elements of these narratives that held constant. Before his first drink, the protagonist is a promising young man. He begins to drink either under external influences, a desire for excitement, or to please friends from a bad crowd. His desire to drink overwhelms any other motivations. He then loses his family, livelihood, and/or health. If he is redeemed, it is from an outside force. The protagonists were almost always men, and their “fall” was seen as a loss of both their gender and their humanity. He lost qualities associated with masculinity, such as intelligence, strength, and prudence, but also a quality associated with humans more broadly: willpower. These narratives were asking whether the power of alcohol made it necessary to rethink the strength and nature of individual volition (Parsons 2003).

Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, physicians in the United States, Great Britain, and Scandinavia published theories linking drunkenness to concepts of insanity (Tracy 2005, White 1998). The professionalization of medicine and psychiatry after the Civil War led to a proliferation of theories based on the medical theories of the day, such as degeneration theory. The term “intemperance” was morally tainted, so the term was replaced with inebriety. The term “alcoholism” became most popular at the turn of the century in part because it focused on the substance, which dovetailed with prohibition efforts. Inebriety was initially defined as a disease of habitual drunkenness caused by heredity or habit. It focused on predisposing causes that promote a desire for drink. Hereditary inebriates inherited an uncontrollable desire for drink. Around 1880 to 1920, there was also interest in the social origins of drinking. The fast pace of industrial society, immigration, urbanization, changes in gender roles, competition and aggression, and poverty led people to drink as a solution to their problems. Even as inebriate asylums treated inebriates as victims of disease, many doctors viewed it as a moral issue and supported Prohibition as the best way to solve it (Tracy 2005, Rotskoff 2002).

During the Prohibition era from 1920 to 1933, most treatment for alcoholism disappeared, research groups disbanded, and alcohol and drug dependence were seen as moral, political, and legal problems. There were few options for alcoholics. Doctors and hospitals considered them troublesome, undesirable patients (Tracy 2005). Alcohol problems were low in priority for an American public exhausted by over a century of heated debate about alcohol and prohibition (Roizen 2004). There was no satisfactory scientific discourse that explained alcoholism and offered practical treatment options. It was people outside the medical establishment who offered a compelling, modern language with which to talk about excessive drinking (Travis 2009). In the political economic climate of post-repeal, Depression era United States, efforts to help alcoholics could not be a drain on public or personal funds. The nearly century-long temperance and prohibition movements framed alcoholics as moral degenerates, yet biomedical innovations in defining alcoholism and interest in the social origins of alcoholism were wearing away at that conceptualization. Conditions at that time in history were fertile ground for the proliferation of a concept that combined a medical viewpoint with less moral condemnation of alcoholics (White 1998). AA as an organization was appropriate to a particular time in American history, and drew upon a history of American ideas.

AA was founded in 1935 by a stock analyst from New York, Bill Wilson, and a surgeon from Akron, Ohio, Bob Smith. I will present a very condensed version of their history, drawing primarily from Kurtz (1979), White (1998), and Bill Wilson's story from the Big Book (AA 2001), unless otherwise noted. Wilson started drinking when he returned from service in World War I. He drank frequently, worrying his wife Lois, but nevertheless experienced financial success until the market crash of 1929. His drinking worsened. He lost a job because of drinking, found another but lost it after a brawl with a taxi driver. He drank two or three bottles of "bathtub gin" per day. He lost his house and stole money from his wife. In November 1934, an old friend, Ebby Thatcher, visited him. Bill knew him as a drunk, and had heard rumors he had been committed for alcoholic insanity. Bill was shocked to see Ebby sober, "fresh-skinned and glowing." Bill asked what happened, and Ebby replied, "I've got religion." Bill was irritated and expected a "rant," but Ebby spoke calmly about a simple religious program he tried which worked, and had come to pass on his experience (AA 2001, 9). Ebby had become a member of the Oxford Group. The Oxford Group was a spiritual group in the 1920s and 1930s, founded by Frank Buchman, a Lutheran Pietist minister. It was a non-denominational Christian fellowship that allowed its members to choose their own conception of God, and emphasized surrender to God, listening to God's direction, examining oneself, confessing defects, and making restitution. The Group's purpose was to heal the problems of the world through personal spiritual change, not to help alcoholics, but many were drawn to the group. Members were not required to stop drinking or using tobacco, but were asked for visible signs of change in their lives. Many members stopped drinking and smoking as a result.

Bill was skeptical of joining a religious group until Ebby told him he could choose his own conception of God. He became amenable to trying it, but had to be admitted for the fourth time to the Townes Hospital in Manhattan, an expensive facility for alcoholism treatment. At that point, his doctors were speaking to his wife about having him committed. Ebby visited him in the hospital, and Bill asked him again how he became sober. Ebby repeated that he realized he was defeated, admitted it, and turned his life over to God. After Ebby left, Bill still struggled with the notion of God. Filled with despair, he shouted, "If there be a God, let Him show Himself now!" The room filled with a white light, and he felt a wonderful presence (Hartigan 2000). Bill wrote, "There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known. There was utter confidence. I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top

blew through and through. God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound” (AA 2001, 14). Concerned that this might have been a hallucination and an indication he was going insane, he conferred with Dr. William Silkworth. Dr. Silkworth had his own ideas about alcoholism. He described it as an “allergy.” The “phenomenon of craving” differentiates alcoholics from temperate drinkers, and the only relief is total abstinence (AA 2001, xxx). Dr. Silkworth took what Bill told him seriously, although he had seen patients suffer hallucinations from the belladonna-laced drugs Bill was taking. He told Bill that that may have been a conversion experience, and this was known to keep some people sober. Lois visited Bill in the hospital after his “hot flash,” and was startled at the change. She said, “He was different. I knew it right away. And I knew he would never drink again.” When asked how she knew, she answered, “I just knew” (Hartigan 2000, 62). Ebby brought Bill a copy of William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Bill’s interpretation of the book formed some of the roots of what later became AA: the notion that out of despair could come surrender, what Bill called “deflation at depth,” and opening oneself to a Higher Power, and also the notion that there is a diversity of religious experiences. He may have also noticed a footnote in which James observed that the only cure for dipsomania (alcoholism) was religiomania. He left the hospital convinced of the importance of conversion, but also influenced by Dr. Silkworth’s theory of alcoholism as an allergy, characterized by craving and obsession which could not be defeated by willpower, for which total abstinence was the only answer.

Bill met Bob Smith, whom AA members refer to as “Dr. Bob,” when he was craving alcohol on a business trip to Akron. Dr. Bob was also a member of the Oxford Group. Bill convinced Dr. Bob to stop drinking, and the two of them searched for other alcoholics to help. They were successful with four men, and decided they had a workable program for helping alcoholics. They eventually broke off with the Oxford Group to focus on alcoholics rather than religion. The Twelve Steps are an adaption of Oxford Group teachings. The Big Book contains a letter from Dr. Silkworth explaining his alcoholism theory, but the Book never expands on or tries to explain the exact nature of the physical allergy. It is simply enough to have the authority of medicine declare that alcoholism has a physical basis, and is therefore not a moral failing or failure of willpower on the part of the alcoholic. After the mention of the allergy letter at the beginning of the Book, the rest of the book moves on to describe AA’s program. I will go into more detail on AA’s practices relevant to my informants’ experiences in chapters 3 and 4.

The period from repeal in 1933 until 1970 is labeled by some alcohol historians as “the Modern alcoholism movement” in which the “disease model of alcoholism” proliferated, although there was no scientific consensus on what alcoholism was (Travis 2009). Conceptualizations of alcoholism were dominated by AA and by a loose conglomeration of scientific enterprises. Both AA and the research groups sought to depoliticize alcoholism to separate it from the wet-dry debate (Roizen 2004). If alcoholism is a disease, then only a subset of individuals are endangered by alcohol, and there is no longer any need for prohibition debates. There was growing public support for the disease model. In the 1940s and 1950s, the WHO, American Medical Association, American Hospital Association issued statements of support. After WWII, municipalities and states began to fund for alcoholism treatment. In 1970, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism was founded. The disease model probably got its most significant boost in the late 1970s, when health insurance began to cover treatment (White 1998). There was still resistance to the disease model, however, that continues to this day. The credibility of the notion of addiction as a disease has been undermined because as of yet no cure or cause has been found. People recover without medical intervention. The disease model tends to be framed as determinism versus personal responsibility. The courts in particular have not allowed addiction to excuse personal responsibility for a crime. In 1968, the Supreme Court held that alcoholics are responsible for conduct while intoxicated. Increased public awareness of fetal alcohol syndrome in the 1970s also fed reluctance to excuse personal responsibility.

The modern paradigm of addiction as brain disease had its start in the 1970s when scientists began to study neurotransmitter receptors. Neurotransmitters became the mechanism of choice for explaining mental disorders, and the 1990s were declared “the decade of the brain” (Wise 2000). In the 2000s, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) produced what David Courtwright (2010) calls the NIDA brain disease paradigm of addiction as a “chronic, relapsing brain disease” with a social context, gene-environment-stress-interactive component, and often comorbidity with other mental and physical disorders. In their research, neuroscientists use the criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a publication of the American Psychiatric Association (J. Becker, pers comm, 2013).

Older conceptualizations of drunkenness have remnants in contemporary society. The disease model has not exonerated alcoholics of personal responsibility for their behavior, for the

notion that drunkenness is a condition brought on by voluntarily engaging in a vice has not gone away. Most recovering alcoholics claim responsibility for their behaviors and do not seek exoneration, although they welcome any destigmatizing effects. These historical developments, combined with broader histories of American self-improvement, provide cultural resources by which people problematize their drinking problems.

### *Addict Math: Quantitative Self-Control*

The alcoholics I met played quantitative games with the number of servings and timing of drinks. I called this activity “addict math” after I kept encountering examples of it. In the United States, a standard drink contains about fourteen grams of pure alcohol, or twelve fluid ounces of regular beer (about 5% alcohol), eight to nine ounces of malt liquor, five fluid ounces of wine, or a 1.5 fluid ounce shot of 80 proof distilled spirits. The National Institute on Alcohol and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA) defines “low risk” drinking as no more than fourteen drinks per week for men and seven for women. Men should not drink more than four drinks on any given day, and women, three.<sup>14</sup> Blood alcohol level peaks 35 to 40 minutes after one standard drink, and it takes approximately two hours for an adult male to metabolize one drink. This time is affected by factors such as eating, since alcohol absorption is affected by how quickly the stomach can empty its contents. Food with high fat content in particular slows absorption.<sup>15</sup> Alcohol results in increased urination, and therefore possible dehydration, which makes hangovers worse.<sup>16</sup>

Moderation Management is an organization founded in the 1990s as an alternative to AA. It does not require total abstinence, but teaches techniques for controlling the amount one drinks. From its website, it is “a lay-led non-profit dedicated to reducing the harm caused by the abuse of alcohol. (If your life is challenged by alcohol, you have arrived at the right place.)”<sup>17</sup> It recommends fourteen drinks per week with no more than three on any given day. I spoke with two men who tried this but ended up manipulating the numbers. One of them could not get sufficiently drunk on three drinks per day, so he “saved” all fourteen for Saturday. Ian tried Moderation Management off and on. He started his week on a Friday so he could start the weekend with “a full magazine.” If he drank ten drinks on Friday, he would think, “Oh shit, I

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/what-standard-drink>. Accessed March 21, 2017

<sup>15</sup> <https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa35.htm>. Accessed March 21, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> <https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh22-1/54-60.pdf>. Accessed March 21, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> [www.moderation.org](http://www.moderation.org). Accessed March 29, 2017.

have only four more drinks this week, and can't have more than three on one day." A woman recalled watching the clock at bars, mathematically calculating when she could have another serving of alcohol. She later resorted to arriving at bars at midnight, two hours before closing, to impose a limit on the amount of alcohol she could consume. She said, "If you're doing calculus and physics in your head, you're an alcoholic." Another man went so far as to equate one drink with one pitcher. In her memoir *Drinking: A Love Story*, Caroline Knapp wrote about a drinking test she read about that set a limit of three drinks a day for six months. She did this test many times and failed. She did not remember consciously doing so, but she would sometimes pour the three drinks into very large glasses so that they may as well have been six. Or, she would have two glasses of beer, but because they were small, she would count them as one glass (1996). People also balanced drinking with other substances. It was common knowledge that eating fatty food and drinking water counteracts the effects of alcohol. A common tactic was to alternate one drink and one glass of water. This both helped ameliorate hangovers and pace drinking.

These efforts to control drinking took place within an American context in which one takes responsibility for one's health by managing risk, in this case managing proper dosage of a potentially harmful liquid. The NIAAA's alcohol consumption standards are among a vast array of available risk management tools. Contemporary society is characterized by an awareness of risk and efforts to mitigate them (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991). Public health and epidemiology use statistical methods to calculate individual risk for developing illnesses. Law-like regularities observed in populations provide a means to determine normal versus abnormal behavior, and individuals exhibit what Foucault termed "governmentality" when they adjust their habits to conform to "normal" behavior (Lock and Nguyen 2010). Governmentality refers to the diffuse means by which the state governs its population for the sake of "the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc." (Foucault 1991, 100). These means are based upon scientific rationalist techniques for maximizing health and well-being. For example, in the field of opiate treatment, the use of buprenorphine has increased in popularity in recent years. In contrast to earlier methadone treatment, which was dispensed only at specialized clinics, buprenorphine is available at doctor's offices and can be filled like any other prescription. Patients may choose their doctor and dosing schedule, and are responsible for self-monitoring and complying with treatment. This therapeutic is an extension of liberal governance

given this emphasis on individual responsibility and self-control. The buprenorphine patients in the study reported feeling “free” and “normal” (Harris 2015).

Michael was a journalist in his late forties. He began counting drinks after his consumption increased when he moved to Austin in April 2011 from New York City. His move took place under particularly stressful circumstances. He had been acting as his mother’s primary caretaker long distance from New York. She died a month after he moved to Austin. That summer, he needed a refill on his Ambien, an anti-insomnia drug, and called his doctor in New York. He told her how much he had been drinking over the summer after his mother’s death. Even though he underreported the amount, she told him, This is a problem. He took a trip to New York in November and saw her in person, and she told him to consider rehab.

That was really scary, because I didn’t think I was at that point. I had been seeing a therapist in Austin at that time, and that therapist thought I needed to do something. She was the first person to start using the word addiction to describe what was going on with me. The following year, in ‘12, I had both a new therapist and a new doctor, and the therapist also thought, You need to work on this, and the doctor, he didn’t say rehab, but he did say, Have you thought about AA? I had four medical professionals within twelve months say, You need to do something about this.

Medical expertise is a system of reference into which alcoholics find themselves. That his drinking was interpreted by doctors and therapists as signifying “addiction” scared Michael into trying to control his drinking. They possessed the authority of scientific knowledge, and he took notice. He began recording how much he drank in his diary after talking to a friend from his Act Up days. Harm reduction was very much something Act Up promoted. His friend told him, Just drink less. Following that logic, Michael kept track of how much alcohol and Ambien he consumed:

While I had been trying to cut back on the bedtime cocktail – taking only half an Ambien and only having 1 drink – ever since the high-stress trip to NYC in April I’ve been averaging a full Ambien, sometimes 1 1/2, and 3-4 drinks.

In an entry from May 2012:

I started with a Tanqueray on the rocks, and had a Tanq and soda, and then another (plus a beer with dinner earlier at Counter Culture). But I had three glasses of water and a veggie burger from the vegan food truck. I wasn’t hungry, but I felt I needed to counteract the alcohol. When I went to bed, I had a sip of rum and half an Ambien around 2 or 2:30 and slept until 12:15. I woke up groggy but at least no hangover.

That entry contained both servings of alcohol and mitigation efforts with food and water. Quantifying and recording things ostensibly gives one control over them. He said, “I thought if I was paying attention, if I count them, then maybe I could control it. It didn’t really work that way. If I got in the right mood, I’d keep on drinking. I might count up to three or so, but after that, I stopped counting and still kept drinking.”

Michael carefully calibrated the timing and amount of the wine he drank at home. He started with a glass of wine with dinner, then would continue, usually while watching a movie. He said, “I had a real pronounced pattern. I’d pour myself maybe a couple of inches of wine in a small glass and after I’d finish it, I’d think, Oh wow, I finished it. I should drink less now. So I’d put one inch of wine in the glass when I went back into the kitchen. But when I’d drink that, I’d go back in for another and another.” He exploited volume and distance as tools for self-control. The small glass minimized the initial portion of wine. Putting one inch of wine for subsequent drinks signified at least an intent to moderate. He watched the movie in his living room, and kept the wine bottle in the kitchen. Having to walk the distance between the two rooms was inconvenient and would hopefully serve as an obstacle to getting more wine. At least, it would slow the pace of drinking.

Ian, an engineer, used quantification to determine whether he was too drunk to drive, but also derived some pleasure from it. He developed a system to convert his drinks to the NIAAA’s standard drinks. The amount consumed in a set period of time gave him an approximation of what blood alcohol level he might have if pulled over. He explained his system to me. One standard unit equals one 12 ounce can of Budweiser which is, say, 5% alcohol by volume (ABV). He wanted to deal only with whole numbers, so he multiplied 12 by 5 and got 60. That number became one unit of alcohol. He was quite proud that he created a system that eliminated fractions. He cannot help thinking mathematically, he said. “In math, you take a complex problem and create an isomorphic, simpler problem.” So for example, an 18 oz Chimay at 7% ABV amounts to  $18 \times 7 = 126$ . Since one standard unit was 60, this was two standard units. He could do the same for whiskey and wine. He knew that different wines had different ABV, ranging from about 11% to 14%, and whiskey had different proofs, say 90 to 100 proof. He was proud that he could do this math in his head while drunk. He did this calculation every time he got another drink. However, he said, “If you’re doing this math at all, you’re probably too

drunk.” At the end of the night, he would do the calculations again, but, he said, “Usually I’d just be like, I’m close [to home].” Ian created this system in order to avoid a DWI, but it was also a way to demonstrate his prowess in math. I mentioned how other people like Caroline Knapp took liberties with what one drink meant, and asked if he did the same. He said he did not, but was “reasonable” in his calculations. For example, he did not fret over exactly how many ounces were in a glass of wine he was served at a restaurant, but counted it as one serving. He did modify what a pint of beer counted for, however. A pint is sixteen ounces, but he counted a beer as fourteen ounces because of the head. He said he did not cheat so much because he would be answerable to an external authority.

Like Michael, he kept records of his substance consumption. He showed me a notebook from the 1990s filled with entries with date, number of servings of alcohol, and amounts of other drugs, such as fractions of grams of methamphetamine. Because of his training as an engineer, Ian may have been particularly inclined to quantify and keep records of his behavior. In his fourteen years of sobriety, he did things like keep track of the books he read through Goodreads.com and the movies he watched through Letterboxd.com. He said, “It feels virtuous to read lots of books,” and the same goes for movies. He also did statistical analyses of his book list at the end of the year, calculating how many women writers, queer writers, or writers of color he read. The records that he and Michael kept of their substance consumption were part of a broader cultural tendency to self-monitor one’s progress in a variety of activities, such as the movement Quantified Self. According to its website, Quantified Self Labs was founded by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly (editors of *Wired Magazine*) and produces “international meetings, conferences and expositions, community forums, web content and services, and a guide to self-tracking tools.”<sup>18</sup> Self-tracking tools are generally wearable sensors that track things like physical activity, sleep, moods, and weight to help users enhance their well-being. There are also numerous apps that can be downloaded to computers or smart phones into which users input data themselves, such as Goodreads.

Other forms of addict math were performed as offsets and disguises. Maggie, who considered herself a food addict in addition to alcohol and drug addict, calculated the number of calories she could eat during the day so she could have cookies at night. She would skip breakfast, which was easy because she did not wake up until 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. She

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<sup>18</sup> <http://quantifiedself.com/about/>. Accessed May 13, 2017.

ate something “light” like a salad or a sandwich with no sides in front of people at her workplace. Then on her way home at night, she would buy cookies and frosting and make cookie sandwiches. She said, “So my calorie intake was, I thought was right, but if you want to do the math, that sandwich was probably like 400, 500 calories and the cookies alone were like 4000 with the frosting and the milk. It wasn’t really right, because I was lying.” Yet, the performance nevertheless did something for her. She ate the light lunch in front of coworkers, thus signifying to them and to herself that she was a sensible eater. When she bought the cookies and frosting, she bought only the amount she would eat that evening, and did not buy the cookies at the same place two days in a row. Thus, the store clerks could not serve as witnesses, so to speak, to her cookie binges. This was similar to a tactic another woman used when buying liquor. She drove around buying miniature bottles of liquor at different stores. She did not want the store clerks to see her buy large containers of alcohol—this would be particularly bad if she bought large containers over and over at the same store. By buying the little bottles at varied locations, she could at least avoid being judged as alcoholic by others. Likewise, the self that Maggie saw reflected from the eyes of coworkers and clerks were also constitutive of her sense of herself. Her restraint in the earlier parts of the day also signified an intent at least to eat reasonably. Another example of offsets was a woman who decided on three standard drinks a day about three to four times a week. As a safeguard against overindulgence, she bought beer only one six pack at a time. However, she would frequently go over the three drinks. She offset deviations by adhering to the food pyramid – for example, eating the minimum five servings of fruits and vegetables – and exercising regularly. Kale or yoga would “cancel out” the extra alcohol. These signifiers of a healthful life offset any signifiers of an alcoholic life. “I can’t be an alcoholic because I do yoga and eat salad,” she said.

### ***Medical Authority: Evelyn and Evan***

#### *Evelyn*

People at my fieldsite took it for granted that addiction has a basis in brain chemistry. Emily Martin (2010) observed in her work with people with mood disorders that, given the pervasiveness of framing psychological experience in terms of the brain, most “flatly assumed” that genetics and brain activity lie behind mental disorders. The people I met made varied use of

what Joseph Dumit calls “received-facts”<sup>19</sup> regarding neuroscientific research in making sense of their condition. Received facts are powerful resources because they bear the objective authority of science, yet are also open for reinterpretation (2003). These received-facts are also the basis of a semiotic ideology (Keane 2007) that conditions what counts as sign-vehicles for people; in this case, their brain and parts of their brain. Evelyn’s use of “brain” sometimes slips into “mind,” which reflects the growing tendency to see the two as equivalents.

Of my informants, Evelyn made the most use of “received-facts.” She was 76 when we met in 2011, and had stopped drinking in December 2007. She and her husband had moved to Austin from California. She described her parents as “poor farmers.” While working, she continued her education and became an accountant after being promoted from a secretarial position. In Austin, she was active in a senior dance club that met twice a week, and served as its Vice President and President. She and her daughter lived in two halves of a duplex in central Austin. She repeatedly asserted the importance of rationality in human conduct. She enjoyed reading popular science, and was attracted to meetings at which atheists or agnostics could be found.

She stopped drinking after being told she had abnormal levels of liver enzymes. She had been on Lipitor, a cholesterol-reducing drug, for ten years. The drug might cause liver problems, and so prescribing doctors perform routine liver enzyme tests. But in December 2007, her doctor’s office called to tell her “You need to cut down on your intake of alcohol.” “I love that!” she said. “Tactful.” She had been drinking throughout her waking hours during the two years after her husband’s death. She mentioned her test results in the Step One section of the workbook *A Gentle Path Through the Twelve Steps*,<sup>20</sup> which she began in March 2008. In a section titled “Aspect of Addiction,” a prompt asks the reader to list “Effects on my physical health” of their addiction (Carnes 1994, 50). She wrote, “Liver enzymes went from 70-80 to 171! Was going to have severe liver problems if didn’t quit.” She remembered the numbers, and made it a point to record them in her workbook. The exclamation point reflects her astonishment at the size of the increase. The numbers provided an “objective” measure of the extent of her drinking problem, and probably had an effect on an accountant with an affinity for numbers.

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<sup>19</sup> Borrowing from Latour and Callon, Dumit uses the term “received-facts” to highlight the process of translation that occurs when scientific findings from the laboratory travel through various channels to reach an audience.

<sup>20</sup> In some meetings, participants recommend this workbook for those having trouble with “traditional” AA.

After the call, she had no problem accepting the idea that she was an alcoholic. She did a Google search for AA meetings, and began attending. She was still drinking while she attended, but in smaller amounts to prevent delirium tremens. Some women at one of the meetings suggested she call a treatment center for detox. She did so, and they suggested she keep drinking in small amounts until she could be admitted the following week. In a common use of brain science among people with a mental condition, Evelyn said she felt ashamed that she could not control her drinking until she read more about the neuroscience of addiction. In meetings in which the theme was Step One, she frequently mentioned an article she read about brain chemistry. The article described how MRI studies of addicts showed that “a string of neurons lit up” differently than non-addicts when exposed to addictive stimuli. She described her reaction to the article to me in more detail:

They call it the craving neurons. Again, it’s just genetics. It’s just lucky if you haven’t got that. That is undeniable almost, that you’ve got that craving. There’s a difference between thoughts about it and craving. Craving is more physical, you know what I mean? It seems like. I still have cravings for sweets, since I’m overweight, but it’s the same thing. They give me more pleasure, and that’s the other thing that I always thought that’s going to be scientifically proven. If you’re born, so to speak, an alcoholic, if you do drink it gives you much more pleasure than it gives the average person, the nonalcoholic.

I had to get strong, very very strong painkillers when I had my back operation. When the pain started letting up, most of the time I had pills left over. They give me a month’s supply. It’s just your brain chemistry. Those painkillers for instance never gave me any pleasure. It’s a difference in brain chemistry.

What distinguishes addicts from non-addicts is craving, according to the science. This has also been AA’s stance from its founding. William Silkworth, the chief physician at the hospital specializing in addiction where Bill Wilson had his revelation, wrote that alcoholics “have one symptom in common: they cannot start drinking without developing the phenomenon of craving. This phenomenon, as we have suggested, may be the manifestations of an allergy which differentiates these people, and sets them apart as a distinct entity” (AA 2001, xxx). For Evelyn, what sets alcoholics apart from “the average person” is the physical craving and a greater sense of pleasure. “Average” people are not better than addicts in any way, they are simply lucky to have genes that do not result in a particular brain chemistry. Brain chemistry also explains why some addicts prefer one substance over another. There is a destigmatizing aspect to her language.

She consistently used the terms “alcoholic” and “addict” versus “non-alcoholic” and “non-addict” when we talked about addiction. She did not say “normal person.”

Yet Evelyn did not consider the brain by itself to be completely determinant. She demonstrated flexibility in how she incorporated neuroscientific received-facts about the brain. With regards to alcoholism, in her *Gentle Path* workbook, she re-worded Step One from “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable” to “Admitted our brain chemistry was powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.” Evelyn specifies what aspect of “we” that is powerless over alcohol: brain chemistry. Her concept of a Higher Power complements her revised Step One. She wrote a letter to her Higher Power in the workbook:

Dear Humanity & Universe,

I have “come to believe” in the power of humans to love one another and that I am not alone in my existence, but am connected to all other living things. I believe there is a power in each of us beyond our cognizant brain that can give us serenity, energy, tolerance & understanding.

There are aspects of “we” that go “beyond” brain chemistry. Our selves are not limited to our brain, and our brain may not be able to comprehend all parts of ourselves. Evelyn folded received-facts in a more complex view of the self.

In her shares in meetings, and when we spoke, she frequently expressed astonishment that she did not realize she was an alcoholic earlier, although she “always drank alcoholically.” At one point, she presented her brain as an agent acting against her. She said, “It just never ceases to amaze me. The tricks our brains will play on us. Like, just because you drink too much, that doesn’t make you an alcoholic. You know what I mean? So I love to drink, but I wasn’t an alcoholic. I don’t think the thought even entered my mind.” Yet, she considered this a little more, this time presenting parts of her mind or brain as an agent against others: “You might have this little, Don’t think about that. Don’t think about that.” Her reaction to the call from her doctor’s office was,

There must’ve been some little, honest, thinking cells going on in the back of my brain because I never thought about cutting down. I thought about quitting. I got to stop drinking, or I’m going to die. And for it to come on that soon, after drinking so heavily, you know all day and all evening, it scared me.

Here, Evelyn contrasts a honest and thinking part of her brain with the rest of her brain. Her use of the term “cells” suggests that this part of her brain is quite small. Rather than being a functional unit of the brain like the prefrontal cortex, or a system connecting various parts of the brain, the thinking portion of her brain is countable in terms of single cells. In contrast, the dishonest and non-thinking part of her brain dominates. Its lack of knowledge about her alcoholic condition is in the foreground, while the thinking cells that know she must quit or die are hidden away in the back of her brain. The thinking cells took heed of the warning issued by the doctor’s office. She used concepts of deception and trickery to characterize the other parts: “the tricks our brains will play on us,” the command “Don’t think about” being an alcoholic, and dishonesty. Evelyn was quite invested in scientific knowledge, in particular quantitative knowledge (at one point she suggested that my study was not scientific because I did not use quantitative methods). She kept expressing astonishment that she could not apprehend what should have been clear to her. The liver enzyme readings were a concrete indication of her problem, and at least some part of her brain was still thinking, and could recognize it as such, whereas while she was drinking, there was a failure of thinking.

As she reflected on her drinking experiences, she mentioned times at which she may have problematized her drinking after all. She was evaluating herself as a thinker. She was working through understanding her failure of thinking; perhaps at some times she had been thinking, at least a little. Prior to her husband’s death, she had never drank daily or nonstop during waking hours. I asked her about her habits when he was alive. She and her husband drank at home only very occasionally, usually for celebrations like Thanksgiving. Her daughter said that on these occasions, her mother would “get sloppy drunk,” with slurred speech and unsteady movements, but her father never drank to that point. Evelyn suggested she may have been aware of the contrast in how much she and her husband were drinking, at least when they went out. Usually, they would go out on Fridays, but would go home early: “He would say, ‘Let’s head on home, honey.’ ‘Okay.’ I never argued with him, so I must have known I was getting over the edge. I guess I knew inside, because he could still shoot pool or whatever, and if it were a dance hall, he could dance ‘til 2:00 AM. He still wouldn’t be drunk. But probably by 11:00 at the latest, we would go home because I was beginning to look stupid or say stupid things or whatever.”

At first, after her husband died, she continued to drink at bars, but also drank during dinner before going out. She did so because her daughter and granddaughter were living with her

at the time. She said, “I didn’t want to just be sitting there. Isn’t that weird? Be sitting there chugging the bottle. I would have three or four, maybe five glasses of wine with dinner because just drinking wine by itself would be suspect. With food, it was not.” In the workbook, she answered a prompt asking about how the reader attempted to control their behavior: “Tried to cut my consumption by half – couldn’t do it – got too depressed & thinking—‘oh the hell with it!’” So at least once, she thought the amount she drank was a problem.

She altered her habits after she almost got a DWI in 2005. She had driven home from a bar, and the police followed her. A police officer approached her as she was entering her house, but her daughter who lived in the other half of the duplex told the officer to talk to her instead. She thinks her daughter talked the officer out of giving her a DWI. She said, “That was when I decided to not go out, so I knew somehow that I couldn’t control it, but I didn’t say that to myself. I was just like, Oh, I should just stay at home and drink. Still not thinking of not drinking.” I asked her whether her decision to stop going out was conscious at all.

I knew, when I started drinking at home, I had never done that before. But I still, it just amazes me how my mind could have just completely blocked that out. That I crossed a line. I wouldn’t have even been able to put it into words then. Maybe if someone asked me, What’s your thinking? But looking back, that was the feeling I had or something. And then of course I thought I was hiding it, drinking from the moment I got up until I went to bed. Brandy. Straight.

She began hiding the brandy after her daughter who was living with her directly questioned her about it. She said, “Because I had it out in the open. Maybe that’s why I started sneaking it, keeping it in my bedroom. I had a big old bottle of brandy in the fridge, and she said, What’s this doing in here? And I said, I want to have it after dinner [Laughs].”

I asked what she got out of crossing the line. She said, “I knew it would give me pleasure. I knew I would feel good by doing that, and I did. Of course. Eight o’clock or nine o’clock, I would go to bed feeling good.” I said, “Then you would wake up and want to feel good again?” She laughed, and said,

You know I can remember specifically having the thought, [mocking high-pitched voice] “My husband just died. I miss him so much. I’m hurting so bad, and now I have to take care of my daughter and my granddaughter, and with this little kid in the house.” I don’t know if I ever thought of it in words, but looking back, I think I did kind of, a little bit or something. “I don’t want to worry about anybody. I don’t want to do anything for

anybody. I just want to sit here and feel this pleasure. Because I deserved it. [Mocking voice] Because of all I've been through," as the famous old words of people using it as an excuse.

I mentioned someone who said drinking was her reward for suffering. She said, "Well, that was what I was thinking too, by saying I deserved to be having a wonderful life because of all I've been through with my husband. Maybe non-alcoholics drink a little bit more when something horrible happens to them, but if you don't have that brain chemistry..." She held up her hands.

As we were talking, she mocked her past self, who had used her emotional pain as an excuse for drinking. Perhaps I am biased in thinking she was being unduly harsh, but the notion of drinking as a reward is widespread among drinkers as a group. She acknowledged this when she remarked upon non-alcoholics also drinking more during painful experiences. Yet this type of behavior is more complex than excuse-making. I had a conversation with my hair stylist in Austin who was trying to stop smoking. She was the child of heroin addicts, and avoided drugs and alcohol, but smoking signified something different for her. She started as a stylist, worked hard enough to eventually own her own salon, and sold it for a profit. She said her reward for being a hard working entrepreneur was going home after work, stepping onto her back patio, and having a cigarette. Michael also used alcohol as a reward. He drank wine at home only after completing all tasks for the day: work, gym, and the evening "check-in call" on his mother. He said, "Undoubtedly I looked forward to that first drink for the pleasure it would bring me, but I also probably looked forward to it because it was a marker. It was a symbol of Okay, I'm done for the day. My time starts." He did not drink during the day because he did not want to be impaired at work, and he got pleasure from going to the gym. He also would not be able to sufficiently care for his mother. "But when I started cooking dinner at home, after hanging up with Mom, that was when I started drinking, as a reward to myself for being a good boy—getting through the day and doing everything that I was supposed to do." Being an entrepreneur, a good boy, or a person to whom horrible things happen imbues the consumption of an intoxicating substance with ethical implications beyond the simple physical pleasure or relief of it.

Identifying as an alcoholic, specifically as a person with a medical condition observable in the brain, was pivotal to Evelyn making moves away from drinking. She interpreted the liver enzyme levels as an index of alcoholism. Yet, it was more than identifying as an alcoholic. What

also mattered was behaving like a rational, thinking person instead of someone whose brain played tricks on her or who made excuses.

### *Evan*

Evan was the young man introduced in previous chapters who began drinking during his undergraduate years to stay awake on drives, but whose drinking habits progressed due to his continuing troubles dealing with his father and brother's past physical abuse of him, as well as the death of his caretaker Lorraine. When he spoke about stopping drinking, he evaluated himself using received-facts from psychotherapeutics. As Evelyn spoke of herself using brain imagery, Evan discussed his past with a fluent use of therapeutic discourse. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he was aware of his grief, depression, and self-harm. He developed a complex view of his condition, drawing from various sources. Although he did not draw a causal link from his depression to his drinking, he felt it "propelled" his drinking, that it made it worse. He said, "In a way, that's a much harder problem to deal with [than drinking], because it's been something that I had for much longer. I drank for four years. I went from zero to sixty real quick, but my depression I've had for fourteen years now. It's a constant presence." I asked him whether he felt drinking and depression were separate. He said they were not, but alcoholism was "just another way my depression manifested physically." There was a "laundry list" of such things. He said he was not anorexic, but he had "body issues" and developed problems with food. I asked him what he thought of AA's definition of alcoholism as a spiritual sickness. He said alcoholism is a simpler problem than depression.

I think depression is a much more multifaceted problem. For me, there are people in my family, not many, who have a history of depression. My great uncle for one. And so many things kind of have to happen for it to become a major major force. There's a biological hereditary component, there is a physical component that's tied to sleep, diet, exercise, and so forth. There is a social component: isolation. And then there's always the emotional component. For me it was that perfect storm. I lost my caretaker. I was going through a period of intense grief, my older brother just being the, relentlessly teasing me day in and day out. I didn't have many friends because I skipped two grades and I was younger. I was isolated from my peers. I mean it was, it's more of a holistic, whole body and mind issue. I suppose you could say it's a spiritual sickness if you mean it's a sickness of the entire being, your being, mind, body, and soul, everything.

The notion of depression figured much more largely in his assessment of himself than alcoholism. In our conversations, he did not speak so much of alcoholism as he did the “laundry list” of things, in particular what he described as his neediness toward women.

He started drinking when he was in college in 2007, but it rapidly progressed into 2008. His drinking worsened again when he discovered his sister had been raped. He called the rape a “trigger” for drinking, but not a cause of it. In the summer of 2008, he gave a reading featuring a piece he wrote about Lorraine. Afterwards, he “got absolutely wasted,” and sat on a fire escape at a friend’s house, wanting to jump off. He called his older brother, to whom he had not spoken in months. His brother convinced him not to jump. But after that Evan threw himself down stairs twice and continued to burn himself.

He spoke with a friend about his history, his depression, and that he was harming himself. After witnessing him “losing it” at a bar late one night, she suggested they go to an AA meeting. He talked with two or three people after the meeting about his sister. He felt “a freedom and release” after talking to them, but also felt uncomfortable because, he said, “I think because I really didn’t have any desire to stop drinking at all. I knew it was a problem, but it wasn’t something I had any intention of quitting.” He did not have trouble interpreting his drinking as a problem, being familiar with mental health discourse. He went out and drank again after his friend dropped him off at home. He went to the meeting in about 2008 or 2009, but did not return to any form of treatment until 2010. He said, “Everything just builds and builds and builds until, in 2010, during the summer after I graduated, I woke up one morning, puked and there was blood.” Two years later, he wrote a description of this moment in an essay:

I examine myself in the mirror. My eyes are sunken and bloodshot and watery. Every muscle in my body feels too tight, too stiff. My ribs are clearly visible, my skin is tight across my chest, my body thin from spending all my money on alcohol, leaving none for food. There’s bile and blood in the toilet. I study my body in the mirror and note all the marks and blemishes I can see, knowing dozens of others have already faded.

An incomplete list of burns:  
A jagged burn on my left elbow  
A lightened patch of skin on my chest  
The outline of a match head on my hip  
A mark from a lighter on my upper thigh  
Several spots of darkened flesh on my belly  
A discolored patch of skin on my right thigh  
The warped skin on the fingers of my right hand.

It's the blood in the toilet that frightens me. It's the bloody taste in my mouth that makes me call my mom. "I can't do this anymore. I need help. I can't live like this. I need you to get me out of here."

In our conversation about when he stopped drinking, he euphemistically said that a major reason was "digestive problems." I said, "Blood?" He had been both vomiting and defecating blood. Gastrointestinal bleeding was an alarming physical symptom that motivated others to consider stopping drinking as well. Another informant, Ian, said that he did not experience a dramatic bottom. He still had a job, a house, and a family, and had never been arrested. He quit drinking because he was constantly thinking about drinking, which was becoming exhausting, and because of the gastrointestinal bleeding. Experiencing fear when seeing one's own blood is hardly an unusual response. Both Evan and Ian interpreted the red blood against white porcelain as an undeniable and alarming index of the harm alcohol inflicted on their bodies.

Evan's mother talked the leasing company into releasing him from his lease, packed a U-Haul with the belongings that he had not sold for alcohol money, and took him home to Des Moines. He got into a car accident shortly after returning home. He had been downtown drinking shots and beers, and then remembers having the accident after running into a median going 60 or 70 mph. Luckily, there was no one else involved. A police officer and his younger sister showed up at the same time. The police officer did not give him a DWI, but told his sister to take him home. When we spoke, Evan said it may have been better had the police officer given him a DWI, because he started drinking and using again although he started treatment "with every intention of quitting drinking. I really wanted to stop. I was tired of it." He thought two things prevented him from remaining sober: "the whole God aspect of AA," and a girlfriend he met in treatment who continued to use drugs. Regarding God, he said, "I'd been a very solid atheist for quite some time, and that just didn't sit well with me. We talked about the Higher Power. You could use anything: nature, the universe, whatever. But I think maybe subconsciously I was trying to think of something to disrupt the progress I was making, and it was the simplest one." He said the young woman he met did not pressure him to use, but used in front of him, which he said was "like dangling fish in front of a cat. But I always did because I wanted to be with her. I liked her."

He drank almost every day until another accident on April 17, 2011. He had been lying about his drinking to his mother and stepfather, and took money from them. His stepfather had

been sober for thirteen years at that time. Evan thought he knew but did not say anything because “he also knew there was nothing he could do.” He also lost a job during that time, but told his mother and stepfather that he quit because he did not like the job. He was particularly disturbed by his lying, and identified it in his journal as something he must constantly work on. The day of the accident, he had been out with friends drinking. He went by himself to a second bar, had more drinks, and flirted with a young woman. He said, “It didn’t go the way I wanted, and so I was very angry driving home far too fast on a gravel road. It was wet, and I ended up losing control of the car. It rolled several times. I remember, one thing I really remember clearly as I started rolling, I thought, ‘Not again.’” The April 24, 2012 entry in his journal contains a description of the accident:

“God dammit, not again,” I said to myself as the car slipped out of my control, as the right set of ~~wheels~~ tires lost contact with the gravel beneath them, as I ~~fell~~s the world around me fell sideways.

~~The I roll and~~ The car rolls and it rolls again and then everything stops. Everything is still and sideways. The dashboard is lit up, all reds and oranges and greens, blinking at me. My glasses are missing and I don’t know what’s what. There’s glass everywhere, in my lap, in my hair. My window is shattered. The moon roof is shattered. My head hurts and I can feel the wet trickling, tickling blood dribbling down my face.

And then I am outside, wandering, dazed. I don’t know what’s the alcohol and what’s shock from the accident. I’m wandering in the dark, ~~the~~ my hands are bloody, my face is bloody. I can make out some figures in the distance, three of them. Someone is shouting,

“Hey you alright!”

I shout back, words blurring and blending together, “You an off duty officer!” I repeat myself again and again, it’s all I can think to say. One of the figures shouts a yes back. They’re close enough now, there’s three guys maybe my age, maybe older. They tell me an ambulance is on the way. I pull my cigarettes out of my pocket, most of which are crushed, mangled. I find one intact amidst the ~~wrecked~~ shards of glass and remnants of the broken cigarettes. My lighter, too, is still present and functions. I can see the ambulance lights in the distance. ~~I light my cigarette, sit~~ I sit down on the ground ~~and wait,~~ light my cigarette, and I wait.

The police and ambulance arrived, and he was taken to the hospital for an MRI and CAT scan to check for head and neck injuries. He did not receive a DWI for that accident either. The police charged him with public intoxication and failure to control a vehicle.

The judge looked at it and was very puzzled. He looked at me, like, What? I was like, I don't know. I should have gotten two DWI's. I think it was because of that that I finally made my decision to stop, because I really pushed my luck there, and it wasn't worth it. I wrecked my mom's car that she owed \$30,000 on. I wrecked the car that my stepdad had given me. They only had one car left, so there wasn't anything left to wreck. I started treatment the next day for the second time. Same place. They weren't surprised to see me back.

His second time at treatment was "simple" and "very, very smooth" because he was committed to sobriety. It was less awkward for him to return because they understood and expected it. The judge's surprise was the last straw. He had wrecked two cars that did not belong to him. He felt consternation over the harm he inflicted on himself. In a journal entry written soon after treatment, he asked himself, "What is it that brought me here, to this point? What makes me drink like I do? That made me, in a fit of passion, throw myself down a flight of stairs not once, but twice." To help understand himself, he made lists of what he likes and dislikes about himself:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| +  | -  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• writing talent</li><li>• social prowess</li><li>• sense of humor</li><li>• love for people</li><li>• facial appearance</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• laziness</li><li>• pathological lying</li><li>• lack of hobbies</li><li>• addiction to internet</li><li>• money management</li><li>• excessive drinking</li><li>• poor study habits</li><li>• need for others</li><li>• body image</li></ul> |

These were the problems he hoped to fix. He attended only one AA meeting after treatment. He said,

A lot of the AA groups, 95% of the AA groups in Des Moines, were filled with people who were low income, low education, blue-collar people. And it's not that I can't interact with those people in normal settings, I do just fine, but when I was in those groups, it was hard for me to find anyone to relate to. I would share, and half of it would go over someone's head. They just, the language just wasn't the same. And it just made me feel further isolated, furthered feelings of what's the point, or this isn't going to work.

When Evan spoke at meetings in Austin, his shares had a literary quality in the way he narrated events and in the imagery and analogies he used. The traditional AA view is that all alcoholics share the quality of alcoholism, and that alone makes them similar enough to form a fellowship.

But for Evan, that was not sufficient. Other qualities mattered for him to include himself in a fellowship.

He spent the several months “feeling hollow” and he “existed, that was it.” He spoke maybe ten words to people in a week. He stayed in his mother’s basement, played video games, and mowed the lawn. Early in his journal, he wrote to-do lists and listed things he was grateful for, his strengths, and things he was proud of. He listed the lawn work and housecleaning as things to take pride in. His situation changed when he got a job as a barista at Starbucks and went to therapy, but he credited a self-help book, Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*, with helping the most. His manager at Starbucks, who had been sober for twelve years, recommended it to him. I will discuss that book in more detail in Chapter 5. He said the book was “about the process of creative rejuvenation, finding that creative spirit again. Because you sort of shut it off. You starve your artist, so to speak, whether it’s by substances, or by telling yourself you need more money, you need more time, or that it’s a waste of time... And that actually played a major major major part in my recovery from August onwards.” The book recommended keeping a journal and writing three pages every morning, and he did so faithfully for over a year. Above all, he considered himself a writer, and hoped to make that his life’s work. He wrote,

There is NOTHING more important than freeing my artist from the prison I placed him in. I fed him scraps, if anything at all, and he has starved, wasted away, like a clothesline, so thin, his clothes barely holding onto his skeletal frame. But the key is in the lock, turning, there’s a meal waiting, he’s almost a free man. Securing his escape is my number one priority – Everything else is a very distant second.

Evan’s life after drinking was based upon writing as his ground project. A month after his one year sobriety date, he decided to take a vacation in Austin to explore moving there. He felt living in Iowa was holding him back, that it was a set of “shackles” on his legs. He wrote,

I just want to make my landing and begin, come in as the person I would actually like to be. And, just so I’m clear, I ask myself here on the page, who is that person? What is it you want to be? How do you want to act, to be seen if you had your way. That person is this – I want to be actively intellectual, reading and writing and researching constantly. Everything is to feed my mind and my creativity. I want to be a part of the city, of the community, in a group of writers or other artists, speaking on the aspects of creativity, the acts of creation. I want to maintain my newfound confidence and I want to pursue honesty even further – an end to lying and emotional withholding. I want to put an end to my wielding my blackness as a shield, a tool, a joke. It should be none of these things. It is a strength, a serious matter, and it’s time I discard the jokes and the idiocy with which

I've used my blackness. My anger at the racial injustices, the insensitivity, the smallest trivialities that anger will be what I allow to rule, instead of the jokes and the deflection. It's okay for me to be mad, for others to feel my anger. That is the person I want to be, the person I'll become.

I reproduced the above excerpt at length because those elements of the good life that he aspired to structured his time in Austin. At the time of this writing, he is working on a Master of Fine Arts degree in writing (with full funding). Evan made less use of AA's program than my other informants. He never got a sponsor or worked the Steps. He went to meetings to share and listen to other people's stories and made friends in AA, but he performed most of his ethical labor outside of the fellowship. The above goals were his recovery program. He made major shifts in the ethical basis upon which he lived his life: from imprisoning his artist to exercising creativity and intellect, from lying to honesty, and from disparaging his blackness to taking pride in it. When he moved to Austin, he made other shifts. He got a job in AmeriCorps and took great interest in his work helping black and Latino middle school students. He began to cultivate friendships with people whose work centered upon similar work, such as social workers. His journal contained a great deal of reflection on his relationships with women, and reconfiguring his attachment to them was another priority for him, particularly in terms of autonomy. He hoped to depend on them less and need them less.

### ***Gabriel: Legal Coercion and Choice***

Gabriel was a Latino in his mid-30s. He was reserved in large groups, funny and sharp in groups of two or three. Some attendees at AA meetings bring slips of paper to be signed. Some brought folded 8.5 by 11 inch sheets of paper from their outpatient therapy groups. More commonly, people bring in what look like colored index cards which they present in court as evidence of attendance. Most people bring them in for DWI convictions. A few AA groups refuse to sign these cards because AA's program is meant for "those who want it, not those who need it." The groups I attended signed the cards. Halfway through meetings, when the basket for donations was passed, Gabriel would drop in a buff-colored card. He later told me he was assigned ten years of court-mandated twice-weekly AA attendance as part of his probation.

While at lunch with a group, he talked about the layout of the city of Huntsville. I asked, "You lived in Huntsville?" Another person, looking amused at my question, said "He was incarcerated there." Huntsville is a city famous for its prison, where executions take place in

Texas, but I did not assume he was incarcerated. Gabriel said nothing more at the time. He did not tell me why he was in Huntsville for several more months. I assumed burglary or drug charges, given his thoughtful, gentle demeanor. The first time I asked him in an interview about when he stopped drinking, he said he was not comfortable talking about that yet. It is likely he was uncomfortable sharing the fact that he was incarcerated for sexual assault with a female researcher. He later told me that he disclosed the reason to other men in the fellowship, but he mentioned it to only one other woman, his friend Jennifer, who also participated in this study. He said that when he told her, her response was “Want to know what I did?”, a humorous response that assured him that her friendship toward him had not changed because of the disclosure.

His stories about his problems with drinking were interwoven with religion, women, and masculinity. We talked a lot about religion at first. He was raised a Jehovah’s Witness. He could not participate in extracurricular activities at school, and college was out of the question despite his obvious intelligence. He sought freedom through music, and learned to play guitar. When he was fifteen, he told his parents he did not believe in God; thus began his “recovery from theism.” As he described it, “I’ve been living a secret [being an atheist] for a long time, struggling with that, trying to find my place in the whole bubble of nonsense. My place was not in a bubble of nonsense. I had to burst it. It was hard. And I drank a lot over it.” Since he told his parents, it has been a source of continuing conflict between them.

Alcohol afforded Gabriel a kind of freedom that contrasted with the restrictions of his upbringing. He drank with a girlfriend who could make the most of anything, who could eat stale bread and Hershey’s syrup, the only food in their bare apartment, with insouciant relish, but who could also pull up stakes and move to North Carolina with a new boyfriend. He and his non-Jehovah Witness friends would grab six-packs and head for the beach on the spur of the moment. He liked to sit with a bottle of whiskey at his feet, uncork it, and take a pull. The drinking was part of his stage persona when he played with a band. Although he married young and had a young daughter, alcohol allowed him to remain a single ladies’ man, at least on stage. He said he missed drinking, even the sloppiness and mumbling and being unable to stand or walk, because “It was my right to do that. I was a man, you know. I had the right to do that. That’s what you do. We earn it. We work hard.” Gabriel’s primary job was as a construction contractor. He frequently traveled to jobs. He said, “I would kill a sixer from Austin to Lockhart. I used to miss that: extra long drives like when we worked in Waco or Killeen. We jumped in the truck, the

three of us, and we'd get an eighteen pack and just slam them. We would have to stop again to use the restroom and get more." Like Michael and my stylist who smoked, the substance was a reward for performing his duty. An indulgence is not a mere indulgence if one is a hard worker.

But there was a darker side to his drinking. He decided in early 2006 to cut down on drinking after he and his wife almost got into a serious accident. His extramarital activities also increased. He said,

I wanted to stop. I wanted to be a better person and a better husband. I wanted Kerrie and I to be happy. Just wasn't happening on my terms. And so, you know, I was pretty much being a little bit riskier every time. Take it to another level. I actually cut down a lot, but sure enough after a show or a gig, I would get shitfaced or fucked up.

A few months later, his "riskier" behavior resulted in his arrest after he had non-consensual sex with a woman who was intoxicated, and with whom he had been flirting at a party. He himself was intoxicated at the time, and only remembers parts of what happened. He plead guilty out of remorse for what he did. He was sentenced to five years, out of which he served eighteen months. He was not allowed to drink and had to attend AA as a condition of his probation after his release. He quit his band and refused any subsequent offers to play because he was afraid he would drink if he played. "If I continued to play in bands in bars, there's an atmosphere, an electricity when you play, people shaking your hand, patting your back, offering to buy you beers."

When asked about when he stopped drinking, his immediate response was that it was a choice. It took almost two years for his sentence to be carried out, and in that time, he did not go to AA meetings or receive any other treatment. He never overtly identified as an alcoholic, but did not vigorously oppose it, either. He had issues with the wording of the First Step, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." He thought it should be worded, "Admitted I believed that my life was unmanageable, that I was powerless over alcohol." I asked what the significance of "believed" was. He explained,

You think you can only do something this way, and it's all about how you picture it, how you perceive it. When I was drinking, I tried to stop many times. I *couldn't*. But I *believed* that alcohol had this grip on me, and that's not true. Alcohol was just something I used to avoid things. To avoid dealing with things I needed to deal with. The steps give alcohol this magical power. I kept myself from drinking. Before AA, I didn't drink, and that's because I made the decision. I'm not going to drink; this is it. I made a promise. I

made a promise to Kerrie that I wouldn't drink...I still remember that feeling, of making that choice, and how it impacted me, saying that. I remember saying after hangovers, never again, but not meaning it.

Gabriel mentioned the feeling he had making that promise to Kerrie. His mood after the assault was different from the other times he made promises to cut down. He did not "mean it" the other times, but when he spoke the promise to Kerrie, he did mean it. The severity of his legal troubles certainly contributed to this new mood, which perdured during the two years he waited to go to Huntsville.

This mood opened up the possibility for resignifying his actions, and then acting differently based upon the new significations. How he described "belief" is related to Jonathan Edwards' description of voluntary action. Gabriel did not believe in free will because he felt that was a Christian invention. His phrase "You think you can only do something this way" describes habitual thought. Such a habit, thinking alcohol has power over you, takes away conscious choice over whether you drink or not. Freedom enters when you are able to do otherwise. If you are able to "picture" or "perceive" your actions in different ways, you have an additional choice as to what action to take. You then have the ability to do otherwise. Gabriel came to picture drinking not as the inevitable result of alcohol's power over him, but as a way avoiding problems he must deal with. The actions before him used to be 1) drink or 2) not drink, but he resignified the options to 1a) avoid problems or 2b) deal with problems. He chose #2b. Thus, saying one is powerless over alcohol is inaccurate. He developed the view about drinking as avoidance over time. Yet, immediately after the rape, he saw he could act otherwise than drinking: he could keep a promise to Kerrie. Foucault stated that when social processes "provoked a certain number of difficulties around" one's behavior, this makes problematization possible (1997, 117). The severity of Gabriel's difficulties created a mood which inclined him to engage with his drinking in multiple, novel ways. In addition to the options 1a and 2b, his options were also 1c) make a commitment to an important person whom he wronged, or 2c) disregard her as he had been doing and keep drinking. He also knew his arrest was very hard on his daughter, and he was answerable to his wife for that, too.

He mentioned a friend who said his "disease" got him high, and that he "didn't rely on his divine source." He thought this type of religious language "deflected" the truth about one's ability to control oneself. "If I were to go back to that, I would be slipping back into delusion.

I'm grasping for knowledge. I want more knowledge. I want to know truth. Not the opposite. The point of my drinking was avoidance." Gabriel's commitment to his views on self-control were also motivated by his desire to distance himself from the "bubble of nonsense" he suffered as a Jehovah's Witness.

He went further and said that his friend was not willing to look at the fact that he decided to go to the eastside to get some crack cocaine. "He has to get into his truck to do that! It doesn't just magically fall from the sky into his hand, or into his pipe." He elaborated:

I'm willing to say that I'm doing it under my own power, so to speak. It is what I will, so in a sense it is willpower, and that would be totally rejected in a traditional meeting, although some people say, It's just us making choices. I think that it *is* my choice. If I did relapse, I would have to make a conscious decision to do it. I would have to put myself within access of the drink, so it's not gonna magically fall in my lap. Even if it does, it's not going to magically pour in my mouth.

In the above quote, Gabriel places great emphasis on the conscious nature of action. He imagines himself as an actor with full self-awareness and full self-management, thus rejecting depth psychology as well as religion.<sup>21</sup> He described a time he almost drank during his divorce, after his release.

I actually went to the store and I looked at the beer, and I was, I thought about opening the door to get the beer. That's as far as I got. I just walked out. I talked myself out of it. That's my will. My willpower. I guess that's my intellect, my ability to be sober of mind I guess.

Again, his explanation evokes Jonathan Edwards. Drinking is a series of actions: getting to the store, standing in front of the beer case, opening the beer base, taking out the beer, opening it, then drinking it. At any of those moments, Gabriel can step back from his absorbed engagement with alcohol. He can consider what his actions signify, then do something else. In his words, he could perceive or picture his actions as something different. Drinking came to signify avoidance. Not drinking signified keeping a promise, treating his wife better, and dealing with things even if he does not want to deal with them. Emphasizing the choice rather than God as preventing him from drinking signified truth and knowledge. His non-drinking self is different from his drinking self not only in that he stopped avoiding things, but that he is no longer delusional. He used the

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<sup>21</sup> This observation of Gabriel's self-imagining was contributed by Webb Keane.

term “magic” derisively a number of times while describing AA thinking. Like Evelyn, he came to value rational, clear thinking.

His view of choice is not starkly individualistic, however. I asked him to further clarify his objections to other alcoholics saying God helps keep them sober. I asked whether he thought that there are no mysterious beings and forces that act in the world with him. He said, “There are many forces that act on me, like the little slip that I have to get signed. I’ve seen the power behind it. It’s tangible. It’s been proven.” I asked what other forces there might be. “Family. People believing in me.” Although he was ordered by the court to stop drinking, he did not experience that as purely the direct product of coercion by the legal system, although there was a significant threat: violation of the conditions of his parole would result in ten years in prison. He of course did not want to make his legal troubles worse. Yet, he never spoke of not drinking as something he was forced to do. He was more concerned about being a good person: taking action to stop avoiding, keeping the good opinion of people he cared about, and not letting them down. In particular, he carried the burden of having failed to keep his family together. One of the things that kept him going in prison was imagining a complex scenario involving Kerrie getting married again:

When I was “on vacation,” I knew that we were going to get divorced. That’s what I expected. I didn’t expect it to take so long. So I had this idea that she would find the right father, the stepfather for my daughter, and I’d like him. I never imagined the circumstances we were going to be in, but I imagined everybody moving on, and being cool with it. And the fantasy is that, at her wedding, I would walk her down the aisle and give her away to her new husband. And so I told her that. And that’s real, I really had that dream, that fantasy. She was touched by that, she was like, Man that’s a shitty fantasy. It was like closure for me.

Although it may have been too late to keep his family intact, he could still be a good husband in this fantasy and finally treat Kerrie with love.

He eventually found “non-traditional” AA meetings that suited him. Unlike traditionalists, he sought out meetings he described as “a form of group therapy.” Like Evan, he used AA as a place to make like-minded friends, a practice Chris would have frowned upon as working the fellowship, not the program. He preferred a group therapy-type approach because in those meetings, “It’s not a mystical thing where you’re fighting evil and good will overcome. It’s about addressing what you need to address about yourself and not running away from it.” He

described his new friends as educated, which he said was a new thing for him. “There are people in the groups who are very intelligent, who call me out on [delusional thinking].” For example, a man helped him clarify his language and therefore his thinking:

I had to be very careful about my wording, like I don’t know the real meaning of the words I’m using. So he’s taught me wording *is* important. It’s better to speak clearly than in riddles. I learned to speak in riddles from a decade of conspiracy theory, and so that helped me to see what I was doing, spinning my reality to fit me, not fitting myself to reality.

When he spoke of fitting himself to reality, he meant that his thinking should adhere to scientific rationalism. Gabriel’s example illustrates what choosing entails. It seems almost ridiculous to point out that legal coercion does not automatically result in a particular behavior, as countless observers have noted (e.g., Rhodes 2004). People do not follow a categorical imperative to reverse actions that result in negative consequences. Gabriel was amidst an array of systems of reference, and had, at particular moments, with awareness of others’ eyes on him, objectified his behavior according to different standards, and took actions under different descriptions. He also found the beginnings of a new ground project in his search for truth, in particular making sure his thoughts aligned properly with reality, and becoming something far different than his drinking self.

### *Authenticity: Alan and Chris*

For Alan and Chris, sobriety was inseparable from learning how to be gay. This was based upon ethical concerns centered on contemporary American concepts of an authentic self, which are an outgrowth of individualism and Romanticism. I will use the term authentic as a gloss for my informants’ concerns about being real and true to themselves. To be authentic in this American sense is to live as one’s “real” self dictates. This real self is found in one’s innermost urges and sentiments, and is to be nurtured without undue pressure from social norms and expectations. To properly express one’s real self, one must be the same person across situations. These notions were strengthened by developments in psychotherapeutics that emphasize self-realization and -fulfillment (Moskowitz 2001, Nolan 1988, Rice 1996, Rieff 1966). There is a large literature criticizing the importance placed on the self and its sentiments

(e.g., Lasch 1978, MacIntyre 1981, Rieff 1966), but I am simply pointing out these concepts as a powerful resource for ethical self-fashioning.

Alan traced the source of his inauthentic behavior to his upbringing as a child in a military family. Because his family moved frequently, he said, “Some of the fallout of that was that I would be what you want me to be. I became a chameleon, so I chose to not tell you who I am. Living in that image became a polished act. And I did that for many, many, many years, and I became good at that. My commitment in recovery was to be real.” He was uncomfortable with the dramaturgical performances (Goffman 1959) in which he presented a different self in different contexts. He went to country and western bars, golf courses, poker games, and behaved as what he called a typical straight male Texan while being in the closet. He said alcohol helped with the “cognitive dissonance” associated with having all these personae. In sobriety, the first thing he changed was the conduct of his sex life. How he used to do it was not good for his self-esteem, he said.

I would go to a bar, wait for someone late at night who was still thirsty, and before closing say, Hey, I have an extra bottle at home. Come on over. Presumably as a straight guy. I would bring them over to the house and we would both would get drunk and pass out. During the night, something *amazing* would happen. The next morning, we would wake up and pretend nothing happened. This happened at both regular and gay bars. At the time, people knew me as a straight guy. Or I would hang out with a straight friend at my house and we would get loaded, and I would say, Oh, you don’t have to go home. You can crash here. In the middle of the night, magic would happen where they would pretend to be asleep and I would have a great time, and the next morning, we’d pretend nothing happened.

He had mixed feelings about this at the time:

There was a part of me that likes to do things that are naughty, so that part was, like, I got away with something. Thrill-seeking. I got a rush. My hand was in the cookies...well, it wasn’t exactly theft, but I got a thrill. But I wasn’t going to get a husband. It was just a physical connection. I felt like I was doing something wrong, which on the one hand gave me a rush, but on the other, made me feel like a criminal or an evil guy. But the challenge for me in my life is to get *all* my needs met, not just get laid. And one of my needs is to hold my head up, and that approach to getting my sexual needs met didn’t help my self-esteem.

Alan’s drinking produced a number of detrimental effects, including five DWIs, but what concerned him most were the ethically troubling implications of his sexual behavior. He was uncomfortable with the types of inauthenticity in his behavior; they raised the question, “Am I a

good person?” He was living under the pretense that he was straight, and he and the men pretended nothing happened the next day. When approaching the men in the bar, he spoke only of wanting to drink with them. He characterized himself as a “manipulator” prior to getting sober: “I was unable to be honest about what I needed.” He got what he wanted in indirect ways, hiding his intentions. This was dishonest in accordance with the personalist theory of meaning (Duranti 1988, 1993a, 1993b), in which sincerity is determined by whether his speech corresponds to his intentions. Finally, under normative sexual views, romantic love, in which people are authentic with each other, is preferable to connections limited to physical contact.

Alan continued to do this until he stopped drinking in 1994. His father died in January of that year, and then he got his sixth DWI on April 15. After he was arrested, he knew he had to appear before a judge. He planned to manipulate the judicial system to make it work for him. He needed to say the right things to the right people, and so he would need to know what they said at AA meetings. He was preparing to play a role of a penitent alcoholic already on the road to reform. He was familiar with AA because his father had gone for a while, and Alan had gone to Ala-teen. He went back to his father’s meeting to look for people he knew because “If I had a history with someone, there was a better chance of manipulating them into helping me through a difficult situation. So while I was coerced, I also decided to go.” Like Gabriel, he did not experience his actions as being completely forced. There were one or two oldtimers who recognized and welcomed him. He was not scheduled to see the judge until July, so he went to meetings three or even four times a night for a period of months because he “got thirsty” at 5:00, 8:00, 9:00, or 10:30. “I was like, What do I do with myself? I had a lot of free time.”

He did not see a judge, but the head of the Williamson County probation program, who he discovered later was in AA. He said to Alan, This isn’t your first time. What’s going on? Alan answered, I don’t know. He had read in the Big Book that sometimes an alcoholic will tell you they do not know why they drink, that they are baffled. He said, “So I followed the script and it worked.” As with the women in the treatment facility Summerson Carr (2011) worked with, Alan gathered information on the institutional settings he would encounter, determined what kinds of discourse would elicit a lenient response from the personnel, and “flipped the script.” In other words, his speech had a semantic intent different from that which it mimicked. He apparently succeeded. Instead of being sent to jail, he was sent to an inpatient center for four months. Alan thinks it was because he said “I don’t know.” He went to Central Texas Treatment

Center, which he remembered as being founded by Ann Richards.<sup>22</sup> “I remember Ann Richards fondly. Texas used to be all about crime and punishment, but this facility was experimental at the time.” It held 75 clients, half men half women, in separate wings. Each country had a quota for beds. “Those beds were sought after. I think I had friends in high places who greased the wheels for me. I was honest with the PO, but I think I had help.”

After being told he was going to treatment, he said, “Now I was ready for the next conversation. I’m always prepping, and I’m thinking what game will I play with the people in the treatment center.” He knew that he would be asked why he got drunk the day he was arrested, and so had two stories ready. The first was untrue: he got drunk because he was upset his father died: “My dad died, and it was really hard, and I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do.” The second one was true: he was at a bar to meet one of his friends with whom he had that unspoken understanding. The friend did not show, and so he got angry and went to a gay bar, got drunk, and got caught on the way home. He said,

The second story was I was gay and living in a closet and didn’t know how to live my life out loud. I told them I was gay. The therapist’s response was like, Really? In 1994, the tide had turned and people were okay with your sexuality. I wasn’t expecting that in Williamson county.<sup>23</sup> And I was surprised they were not surprised. They said I need to make that known to people in my life in order to stay sober.

The counselors encouraged authentic expression for therapeutic reasons. Despite the importance the treatment center placed on authenticity, Alan kept to his plan of playing a part. He set out to master the Big Book so he would have all the right answers when examined by authority figures. He said, “Now I was still playing games at the time, but I thought I needed to get a handle on this because there was going to be a pop quiz in my future.” If he was kicked out of the program, he would be sent for two years to “Safe-P” (Texas Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facility), which is run by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, an in-prison treatment program. Fortunately, that did not happen, and he was released early to return home rather than a halfway house. “I did a really good job of fooling them or myself. When I got out, I got serious. I wasn’t too concerned about staying sober, but how to be gay.” His counselors recommended meetings run by and for LGBTQ people. He started going to those meetings in December 1994.

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<sup>22</sup> Democratic governor of Texas from 1991 to 1995 who was herself an alcoholic.

<sup>23</sup> Williamson County is a politically conservative county just north of Travis County, where Austin is

There, he met “people who were gay and proud to be gay.” Alan lost self-esteem from the way he conducted his sex life, but began to acquire self-esteem at the meetings. The first of these experiences was being told to “keep coming back.” He explained what this phrase meant to him. “It was along the lines of they needed my experience. When I would jump into a meeting and I’d share what’s going on in my life honestly, that creates value that they perceive as important, so ‘keep coming back’ is the beginning of me knowing that I do matter and I have experiences that are unique and important and other people can benefit.” He became quite active in the group. He volunteered to be on the Steering Committee, and to be the Hill Country Intergroup representative. He joined a group that went out to eat after meetings twice a week. He and his sponsor became regulars at Denny’s because it was cheap and people would join them. He said, “You could go to Denny’s at 9:30 and know there’d be people from the fellowship there. We were sober people, and newcomers would join us and become sober, or they wouldn’t and we’d talk about them.” He stayed in the program to learn to be gay, but stayed longer and remained sober for practical reasons. He liked the results. He felt good when he was being real.

Chris initially stopped drinking when he was around 34. It was not the first time his drinking was problematized. Nine years earlier, one of his sisters had taken him to AA meetings. He did not believe in God, but they told him a doorknob could be his Higher Power, which he thought was “crazy.” But later in October 1989, his sister with whom he was closest got cancer. His brother-in-law called him at home. Chris said he was actually at home able to receive the call because of a hangover. He acknowledged God for the first time in fifteen years by cursing him. “I cursed God, and the next day I just sort of tried to ignore it, and I started drinking more and did coke more.” He wrecked his friend’s car and went through the windshield. The car’s owner was in the front seat. Chris’ best drinking buddy was in the back seat with another eighth of an ounce of cocaine, and ran off when the police came. Chris was given a ticket for failure to maintain control. He got the car towed to his drinking buddy’s house, did two lines of cocaine, and then drank the vodka in the freezer. Chris had been drinking and doing cocaine for a day and a half before this. He lay down on the couch and woke up in the hospital with a blood alcohol of 0.29 about eight hours after his last drink. He said, “I woke up to this nurse looking down at me telling me, Boy I’m glad I’m not married to you.”

He asked about treatment for a number of reasons. Certainly, the seriousness of the accident contributed to it. He preferred treatment to AA because people in AA believed in God.

But he mainly asked for two reasons: “My sister and her family needed me. And my kids needed a Dad—that was huge.” Because he stopped drinking, he was able to spend the remaining months of his sister’s life with her. About his kids, he said, “I thought about how I felt with my kids when I was drinking. I was not a nice person. I never hit them, but I was not a nice person.” Chris asked about treatment on a Saturday morning, but could not enter until the following Monday. “I told my ex-wife that Sunday, I’m going to quit drinking, but I’m sure the fuck ain’t never going to be happy again. I’ve sentenced myself to a life of relative misery.”

He was dismayed when he was sent to AA in the treatment program. However, someone told him for the first time in treatment that there is a difference between spirituality and religion. Chris described his reaction to this notion:

What a concept! I’m a smart person, but it never occurred to me. I knew I had to find something, and this therapist Sandra asked me about God, and I said I’m an atheist, and she said, I used to be. I thought, Oh great, one of them. We talked a little more, and she said, Where did you meet your wife? I said, Teaching religion together. And she did a double take and said, *Excuse me?* She said, Why you mad at God?, and I said, There is no God! The next day in treatment, I don’t know what the fuck, I went from knowing there wasn’t a God to knowing there was a God in a split second. I floated for a day.

Chris was the only one of my informants to have had a Bill Wilson-type “hot flash.” I asked him what he thought happened during that experience. Because he knew he needed something, he said, he was willing enough to relax and let what happened happen. “Sandra asking those questions forced me – somewhere I think in my subconscious because it wasn’t a conscious thought – it came out of nowhere, and it was amazing. I went literally, There was no God, and all of a sudden there was God. And it was all over me, all through me.” Yet, he distanced himself from that type of experience. “People talk about having constant contact with a Higher Power. I can’t maintain that. It’s too powerful. No no no no no. I keep a decent contact with God. If I want some guidance, I can usually slow down to get some idea.” I asked him whether he would want to have that feeling again. “It’s overwhelming. No. No. No. I can see how people can get addicted to it, but I can’t see how people can handle it. I actually floated for a day. I wasn’t there. I was gone. It was powerful. I really don’t want to live that way. You’ve met people like that? Very religious, very spacey.” The experience did not keep him sober, but he did keep trying AA because of it.

After treatment, he began a period of on again, off again sobriety for the next six years. He first stayed sober for nine months and fifteen days, then drank again. He repeated this pattern every few months until his sponsor suggested he stop going to bars and clubs for a year. As many military personnel did, Chris went to a club after work, but stopped and stayed sober for two years. During that time, he started seeing a therapist, and "...took that as my Fourth Step work. It wasn't. It was, but it wasn't. I drank one more time." I asked what the difference is between therapy and the Steps. He explained that the therapist taught him different techniques, such as guided meditation and writing, and helped him deal with pain he felt over things that happened in his childhood, but "The Steps are about living life on life's terms. Therapy is more about the past, and the Steps are more about today. But part of the Steps is looking at the past so you can use that information to live today, and it's not holding you back." The Steps are undertaken with a sponsor who had a sponsor who explains what the Big Book says and what he did to stay sober. "Therapist is, What are you going to do? What is going on? What are you looking at? Driving me inward. And though the Steps might do that, they are more about action."

He said, "I was sounding good. People were telling me I was sounding good. People were asking me to sponsor them. I was going around New Orleans for the last few months, sounding great. But it was all bullshit. I got drunk." I asked him what "sounding good" meant. He said, "People told me, I liked what you shared. I thought I was telling the truth, but I was staying sober basically on the fellowship." "Staying sober on the fellowship" means going to meetings and associating with other alcoholics, but not doing any serious Step work. "Sounding good" is not being good. His speech did not match a spiritually transformed inner state, according to the language ideology of inner reference (Carr 2011). He used AA language, but he was not actually working the program. He had not performed the steps properly. His speech did not have a direct connection between what was inside him and his words; they were not sincere as Webb Keane characterized it: "sincere speech adds nothing in *words* that was not already there in *thought*" (2002, 74). His penultimate relapse occurred in Denver where he went for training. It was the first time he was apart from his wife and children. He and his wife fought during that time about whether or not to divorce. He had not yet come out as gay. When he returned, he drank once more four months later. "That's what I mean it was all bullshit. Because I was saying what I was supposed to be saying. Talking program. Talking the Steps. I can pretend for two hours. Most alcoholics can. All I had to do was convince myself I don't need to drink, life's okay, I'm not

angry. It doesn't matter what I want. She's more important. The kids are more important." In a culture that places primacy on acting on one's true feelings, this is a state of affairs difficult to live with.

After he relapsed, they went to therapy and marriage class. I asked him if he was trying to save his marriage. He said, "I didn't know what to do. I needed to commit to something, and I committed to being there for the immediate future. I had no idea what that meant. I did the best I could." His last relapse occurred after something unpleasant happened at work. He told a co-worker he was going to get drunk, and they went to the club and he got drunk. He then left and had more drinks, then went to a gay bar and drank more.

In the space of ten hours, I drank, I don't know, a case of beer, ten or fifteen shots, and I wasn't loaded. Don't get me wrong, but I was in emotional pain. I realized this shit ain't working. I thought I could get it to work. I was putting it aside because I had to. I didn't really want to, but that last time was the first time I honestly understood while I was drinking that this shit ain't working. Then I realized I need to quit fucking around with the program. I got serious about sobriety, and sobriety became more important than anything. That's why I got divorced. That's why I didn't drink after my son died. That's why I haven't drank yet. Because it's more important than everything.

He made himself go to a meeting every day after that. If he had the thought "I'm not going to a meeting," he definitely went precisely because he had that thought. "Half the time I would tell myself all the way to the meeting, while literally walking into the building, I'm not going to a meeting tonight. Because I relapsed so much, I took that choice away from me." Eventually, he said, he was able to choose to go to a meeting and stay sober, usually going to two or three per week. But even now, if he has that thought, he goes because, "Why risk it?"

He "got a sponsor who worked the Steps with a sponsor" and changed home groups. In his first home group, he was one of only a few people with more than a year of sobriety. His former group did not have many opportunities for service work, so he switched to a group that held business meetings every month and had officers like treasurer and secretary. I asked him how he went about deciding to leave his old group. He said,

There's a little part of me that guides me. I think it's my tie to my Higher Power somehow. Maybe it's my subconscious. I do know it's never guided me wrong. When I get thoughts from that place, I call it a voice, when I hear that I follow it, and that's when I started following it without doubt. That little voice told me I need to change my home group.

“A little voice” was part of a common semiotic ideology. Many people objectified their thoughts, feelings, and impulses as sub-parts of themselves with different “voices.” Usually, the “little” voice served as the guide to proper moral behavior and therefore was the one to be listened to. This voice that told them the right thing to do was the only one of their voices they described as “little.” This suggests that there are other voices that offer wrong forms of guidance, and these thoughts are more prominent, more in the foreground while the little voice quietly remains in the background. There is a sense that the little voice is buried particularly deep. Evelyn’s “little thinking cells” were also buried somewhere in the back of her brain. This aspect of the deep self likely stems from pietistic Protestant views that emphasized using individual feeling as moral guidance. This tradition allows certain thoughts and impulses to become available as sign vehicles signifying the right thing to do.

He drew the attention of “the winners,” or “people who are doing the deal, working the program, not just talking the program.” These people, he said, “seem to have some ability to sense willingness. They’d welcome you, they’d be nice, but they weren’t going to put a whole lot of effort into you [if you were relapsing].” But if a person to them seemed serious about stopping relapsing,

They were pretty straightforward. Go make coffee. Once I bitched about the floor being dirty. My sponsor brought me over to the broom closet. He said, Go mop, and I started mopping the floors. Maybe once a week, once every other week. Service. That’s what I need if I want to stay sober. I didn’t get sober until I could do service, do the Steps. Until I was involved, until I started trusting God, and listening to that guidance, and a whole lot of things.

Again, although AA orthodoxy insists upon the essential similarity of alcoholics, alcoholics looked for other qualities besides merely being an alcoholic. In this case, “winners” looked for other “winners” with whom to form a fellowship. This time he did not relapse, and continued therapy. But for the past six years, he said,

I got on my knees every morning and every night and asked God to make me straight, make my marriage work, make me love my wife like I’m supposed to, and one night it came to me. I had to come out and get divorced, which I didn’t want to do...I thought I would outgrow it. I truly thought I would outgrow it. I got married in ‘73. I thought for sure I would outgrow it. I mean, I don’t know. It wasn’t like it is today.

He told his wife he was gay, and moved out of their house into “a dump.” He also came out to his first sponsor. He said, “I was real ashamed and real scared,” but started going to LGBT meetings. He had previously avoided them for fear someone would see him walking into those meetings, or would recognize his car. At some point during a meeting, he shared “I hate you. I hate being gay. This fucking pisses me off. I don’t get it. I don’t want it.” After the meeting, “almost all the men came up to me and said, Yeah, we all had to deal with our homophobia. It might not have been in those words, but that’s what they were saying.” He continued going, and became further involved in service. He met his second sponsor, Richard, while putting together registration packages for a Deep South AA convention. The door opened and Richard walked in, “...this 80, 90 pound flaming queen. And I’m like, as soon as I saw him, I knew I was supposed to ask him to sponsor me, and I was like hell, no. I wasn’t real wild about being gay.” It was his “little voice” that told him this man needed to be his sponsor. However, it took Chris three months to ask him to sponsor him. He first thing Richard said to Chris when they met was, “You know, Chris, anyone can be straight, but it takes a special person to be gay.” Like the difference between spirituality and religion, this never occurred to him: “That was like a paradigm shift for me. It was like, Whoa.” These two resignifications enabled him to start the labor of reorganizing the conduct of his life. The new ethical basis of his life included a relationship with a Higher Power and the notion that being gay meant he was special, not wrong and in need of fixing.

### ***Jennifer: Place and New Systems of Reference***

Jennifer was a tall, blond, athletic woman in her late forties, with an upbeat gregarious manner. She was born in Chicago, where her parents met. Her father was from Chicago and her mother from Maryland. They moved quite a bit in her early childhood because her father was in oil exploration. Eventually they settled a small town in west Texas outside of Lubbock when she was in fourth grade. She described them as having “a big sense of community” that she missed after leaving.

Most people must have been there for generations. Everyone knew each other’s families. When we did stuff, when someone said, Let’s go to the lake! Let’s go camping!, it would be like 25 or 50 people going. I still have a lot of close friends there because they are good people. If something happens, somebody’s hurt or their family is going through something, they really band together and do what they need to do to help out. I mean,

they'll talk about each other behind their backs, but when it comes down to it, they're there for each other. I like that.

Her mood changed to one of nostalgia. At their get-togethers, there would be mixed ages, with both kids and adults, and mixed ethnicity because the town was both white and Hispanic. She said, "They were really fun-loving people, when I think about it." A family who owned a store would throw a party every year in their business and invite the whole town. They would have a big dance with a band and plenty of alcohol. She said, "I was what you'd call a party girl, had a good time, enjoyed it for the most part." She tried to fit in with an older crowd who drank a lot. When she was a teenager, on Friday or Saturday nights, she and her friends would drive down a dirt road and drink and laugh. "Yeah, I remember, Hey, you want to get together and drink beer?" They also gambled, played poker, and after VCRs were introduced, they watched movies. Most of their parents condoned the drinking and even provided it. During her teenage years in the early 1980s, when she was with people who were drinking and driving, when they were pulled over there were no consequences. The police officer would instead give a verbal reprimand and ask, "Who's the most sober that can drive you home?"

Jennifer stopped drinking she was 28 and living in Austin. She lived in west Texas until she was 26. She did not problematize her drinking while there. She had two arrests while living in Midland, a small city in west Texas. One night, she and a friend were at a bar drinking drinks mixed with Everclear, a clear liquor that is 95% alcohol by volume (vodka typically contains 40% alcohol by volume). They drove home in his truck, and the police pulled him over because things were blowing off the back of the truck (he was a landscaper). As they were arresting him for a DWI, Jennifer confronted the police. "I was not in my right mind. I got out of the truck and was like, What are you doing? I was arguing with the police steps away from the front door of where I was staying." They took her to jail for public intoxication. Her other arrest occurred after she was drinking after hours with the bartender and a friend. Around 4:00 in the morning, her friend said he was too drunk to drive, but she said, "I got it! I drive better when I'm drunk!" She drove his truck going about two miles an hour and was pulled over. She said,

I just had to go to the bathroom and they were trying to give me all these tests, and I'm like, I'm drunk. Just take me in because I gotta pee. They were trying to make me do the alphabet backwards and I was like, I'm drunk!

She went to jail, took a breathalyzer test, and blew over 2.0, which is considered severely intoxicated. The legal limit in Texas is 0.08. She plead guilty and got probation. She said, “At that point, I decided, I just wouldn’t drive.”

She met her future husband when she was 26 while he was on a trip to Midland, and she eventually moved in with him and his children in Austin. Austin for her was “a whole different world,” that the people there were “night and day” compared to who she knew in west Texas. She described her new friends as ambitious, educated, open, tolerant, well-traveled, and environmentally and socially conscious, whereas people back home knew only of their family or close group. Back in her home town, after graduating from high school, she worked at the Dairy Queen for “three-something an hour.” However, she said, “I think my rent was \$90 a month. I always paid my bills, always had a job. I was always able to feed and clothe myself. I never had long-term unemployment. It was just a simple existence.” She continued to work in unskilled jobs. In Midland, she worked at a grocery store. She transferred this job to Austin, but inspired by her new friends, she started a job doing accounts payable at a real estate firm, which led her to study finance and accounting. “I don’t know if I ever would’ve done that if I had stayed [in west Texas]. Maybe, maybe not.” “The more professional types” of her west Texas friends were EMTs and nurses, and a number of the women were in administrative positions, and the men were firefighters, electricians, working in trades.

I will take a moment to briefly address different drinking arenas in Austin as relevant to my informants’ experiences. Alan, for his purpose of mimicking Texan straight maleness, drank at country and western bars, golf courses, and poker games. Maggie, another of my informants, spent a great deal of her young adulthood in cities much smaller in Austin. In the series of small towns in which she grew up, towns which she perceived as “full of rednecks,” she made herself stand apart. “I wasn’t just a fat kid, I was a punk rock fat kid. I’d be very vocal about being weird, very Ally Sheedy in Breakfast Club.” After she dropped out of college in her first semester, she criss-crossed the country under different relationships and drinking and using drugs. Prior to moving to Austin, she described herself as the “coolest person” in a North Carolina small town of about 10,000. Then she moved to Austin, her “home planet.” People on the streets had tattoos and piercings as she did, and so thought nothing of her appearance. That particular crowd listened to the same music she did growing up, and some of those bands were from Austin. “Art, music, partying, fashion. I was now nothing out of the ordinary, when for

years and years before I was *always* out of the ordinary.” She worked at bars and coffeeshops, and eventually her principle line of work became booking musical acts at those places. She discovered like-minded people she could do things with in public, yet this was the first city that, in her words, could out-drink her. She said, “I felt like that was connected to a city where I wasn’t queen of the castle. It was a big enough town that I had to work my way to being a princess in the chamber. It was a bigger pond especially for what I did. Swimming with a huge team of weirdo fish. Not only am I one of you, I am a cliché.” In order to be upwardly mobile in this crowd, she had to keep up with their heavy drinking. To do so, she developed a cocaine habit, for cocaine counteracts alcohol’s sedative effects.

In Jennifer’s case, her new friends did not drink as much as she used to. Jennifer said, “In Lubbock, people said, Let’s get together and drink.” However in Austin, they wanted to hike the Greenbelt, go kayaking, play disc golf, or see a band or a play downtown. Drinking was “an afterthought” for them. However, for her part,

Here I was with my bad habits from where I came from. I’m getting too drunk. People even telling me, Whoa, or Da:::ng, you sure can drink. Or guys telling other guys, This girl can drink you under the table. I’m like, Ugh, is that really something to be proud of? For the first time, I felt out of place in my drinking. I was like, This is extreme. This doesn’t fit in. This isn’t attractive. This is not good.

Her drinking, which back in west Texas signified “party girl,” signified something else in the new system of reference she found herself in. Back in west Texas, alcohol was put into association with all manner of people, things, and situations. Alcohol had associations with fewer things in her new group of friends. When alcohol was encountered in situations in which it had no associations, it was not intelligible. It was strange, out of place. Jennifer wanted upward mobility, not downward mobility. For Maggie, who worked in the entertainment industry, the system of reference in which she found herself put alcohol in association with tattoos, piercings, unusual music and art, and drugs.

In addition to finding herself among health-minded people, Jennifer found herself in a family. Her new boyfriend had children, which further decreased the associations she could make with alcohol. In west Texas, alcohol formed associations with children, but not where she was in Austin. “Sitting there, drinking in front of children, I was like, What am I doing?” The first time she was alone with the young children, she had a hard time keeping up with them. She

was “losing it,” and then the youngest, who was five, went to the refrigerator and brought her a beer. “It was like ten in the morning. I’m like, What the hell? Started drinking, and was like, This is not good. This is not a good example.” She started to drink much less.

When she was 28, she and her now ex-husband got into a serious fight, and she “got physical with him.” He called the police and she was arrested for assault.

I was like, Oh my god. That was my wake-up call. I wasn’t even driving. I wasn’t even that drunk. I think we had a sixpack, so I couldn’t have drunk more than three. I feel like I don’t have control over my life. I hurt somebody that I claim to love. It’s not acceptable. Unacceptable behavior. I don’t like it. It’s nothing I would do in my right mind, even though I wasn’t highly intoxicated. I was like, What is my right mind? Where does it reside? I had to remove alcohol to find it. Find my right mind. So I stopped. I’m glad I did.

When she got out of jail, she hired a lawyer. The lawyer and counselor told her to get counseling at an outpatient clinic at Shoal Creek and do forty hours of community service before going to court. She did the community service and spoke with the counselor about her drinking history. She downplayed the amount she had been drinking and insisted she had it under control. “She looked at me and said, You know, most women never go to jail. You’ve been there three times. Could it be a red flag?” Jennifer considered this. Later, she thought, “I’m done. I’m done trying to act like nothing’s wrong here. I went back to the counselor in tears. Yeah, I think I’m an alcoholic. I got this problem.” To the counselor, Jennifer was a token of a type. In her profession, certain behaviors index a mental disorder. Women as a group do not generally go to jail, and those who do while they are drinking are likely to be a recognizable type in her profession: an alcoholic woman.

Her lawyer also told her to go to AA before she went to court and take a card to be signed at each meeting she attended. What she learned there reinforced what she learned from the counselor. The encounter with the counselor put her into a receptive mood with regards to what she heard. She went to meetings and got the Big Book. “I saw a lot of myself in it, and just came to the realization that I’m done. I’m tired of trying to be something that I’m not. Trying to act like I can drink and not have any repercussions for it. So I quit. I was done.” The preface “The Doctor’s Opinion” in the Big Book distinguishes alcoholics by the fact that they crave more alcohol once they start drinking. The Book also describes alcoholics as “men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking” (AA 2001, 30). Jennifer felt this accurately

described her drinking. She also learned about tolerance. She used to say, “Three [drinks] is just a warm up!” A fourth questionable characteristic of her drinking was that she drank when she did not intend to; for example, “Promising to help somebody move and then them finding me in the bar and being very mad because I never showed up. And I’m like, Well, I’m drinking! Like that’s a valid excuse.”

She went before the judge and was given deferred adjudication with two years probation, for which she was grateful. Under that sentence, if she successfully completed her probation, she could request to have the arrest expunged from her record. She told her probation officer she was an alcoholic and would do anything she needed to do. Within four months, her probation officer told her she did not need to come in to the office, but they can keep in touch by phone and she could mail a check for the probation fees. She said, “I was trusted, and that was huge to me. Maybe that started becoming part of my identity.” She also reconnected with her family, including her father, and her siblings who eventually had children. “They trusted me with their kids when I go see them. I could take their kids with me somewhere. That was huge.”

She says she quit drinking only one time and did not struggle. She said there was no physical addiction as she had for cigarettes, which she said was harder because she craved it and missed it physically. But with alcohol, she had an existential crisis:

It was habit. It was what I knew for socializing. It was my hobby. It was what I felt I was good at, as sick as it sounds. It was my identity. I didn’t crave it. I missed it, but it was more, I grieved that part of my identity that I was giving up. That girl who could drink someone under the table. The one that my friends back in Lubbock would call on Friday or Saturday night, Where are we going? The party girl. What are we doing? It was like, Who am I without that? I felt very stripped down. Empty. Who am I? What do I know? Where have I been, what have I done? What do I have to offer? I just felt like, I was blank. It was so horrifying, having to face life without that potion. I need something in my hand. How do I walk into a room full of strangers and bond with them, or interact with them?

She eventually stopped going to AA because of the emphasis on Christianity at the meetings she attended, and did not return for another twelve years. She stayed sober on her own. Her husband at the time also stopped drinking eventually. She quit first, but they fought more and more. She said the final straw was when she discovered he was buying alcohol with the gas card. They were able to pay off the balance every month, but the fact that he was buying liquor with a card meant only for gas troubled her. She became tired of him becoming drunk and argumentative. She told

him if he wanted to buy alcohol, he should go to the grocery store and write a check. She said, “He was like, You’re trying to tell me what to do. I said, No, I’m telling you what I’m doing to do. I’m not going to live with this anymore.” After she threatened to leave him, he suggested that he stop drinking too, and then “things just blossomed.” Like Evan she found new ground projects. She said, “I shifted my focus from having a good time to focusing on education and my career.” She started college when she was 29. “Just got really intense in learning. I was reading books, old classics like Dickens, like I was making up for lost time. What have I been doing with the past ten years? Just kind of panicked.” Her husband started his own business, which became profitable. “We had a beautiful home and nice vehicles, bedrooms for his kids. When we first got together we lived in 500 square feet in an apartment. His kids were sleeping on a mattress on the living room floor. It’s like we just really got our acts together. I felt like removing alcohol, now I can think, now I can concentrate on something else.” There were no longer any Friday or Saturday night callers asking, What are we doing? When people did call her to include her in things, she was married to a man with three children, so she declined. “It was a whole different lifestyle and it was the right thing to do, to settle down and focus on his kids, and make a career, pay my bills. We became very successful at doing that without alcohol.”

### ***Problematization, Freedom, and Choice***

This chapter examined times at which people stepped back from their drinking and took a third person perspective on it, and the kinds of problem categories to which they compared their drinking lives. Stopping drinking is not a single event such as hitting bottom or a moral breakdown. It is a process of continued problematization and in the words of Jonathan Edwards, doing otherwise. The ethnographic cases illustrate the range of cultural resources that provided types of problems that indicated drinking problems for my informants.

Biomedicine and public health provided prominent problem categories. The NIAAA’s consumption guidelines to ameliorate risks involved with drinking were well known. Several of my informants were aware of harm reduction strategies such as Moderation Management. They incorporated these quantitative risk management techniques into their drinking practices, albeit as what I call addict math. Addict math was a means by which they constructed and maintained a sense of agency with regards to alcohol. Biomedicine provided concrete, authoritative measures by which to frame a problem. Evelyn interpreted the dramatic increase in her liver enzyme levels

as an indisputable index of alcoholism. She also employed received facts from the neuroscience of addiction to define herself as an addict. Evan demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of psychological framings of his suffering, including trauma from past abuse, grief, depression, and body dysmorphia.

The cases I presented contain events that elicited a mood of shock and fear: liver test results, blood in the toilet, a judge's puzzled look, arrests for assault, a sixth DWI, and car accidents. These are what AA members call hitting bottom, and what I call events that produce a perduring mood that opens up possibilities for novel signification of alternative actions to drinking. These alternative actions were framed by problem categories other than biomedical ones. These categories explicitly dealt with the question, What kind of person should I be? One kind involved rationality versus irrationality. For Evelyn and Gabriel, not drinking was the equivalent being a person who thought clearly and rationally. Gabriel also wished to become a good family man. Evan hoped to stop being a lying person who caused financial damage to his family and become a creative, honest person. Chris and Alan experienced suffering caused by what they perceived as a mismatch between their outer selves and the truth of their inner selves, and therefore enacted authenticity by coming out of the closet. After moving to Austin, Jennifer came to see her drinking self as unambitious and provincial, and aimed to become an upwardly mobile, ambitious, socially conscious person with a good family and home.

People may experience an event that produces a mood that disinclines them to engage with alcohol, but from my observations, staying stopped requires formulating options to drinking and moods that incline one to engage in those novel behaviors. Volition or voluntariness comes into play in sobriety. A person must notice times at which there is an option between drinking and doing something else, then do that something else. Addiction therefore offers an opportunity to examine issues of great interest to many Americans: freedom and choice. These are concepts with profound social and political consequences. These concepts are used to define kinds of persons and the rights, duties, and obligations that are conferred or withheld from them.

Gabriel formulated an account of choice that avoided problematic notions of will. Michael Clune, in his addiction memoir *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin*, provided a similar, compelling account of the complexity of agency involved in "choice":

Every addict knows how dope just gets in you. Dope just arranges things so that your actions are like a ball rolling down a hill, and at the bottom of the hill you're high. But

there's a trick. There's a secret. It seems that dope comes from everywhere and goes anywhere, that it's omnipresent, omnipotent, a white god. But it doesn't and it isn't. It just seems that way. It's like when you wake up and your room is full of music. It seems like it's coming from everywhere. Then you realize your window is open. When you shut it the music stops. It's like that with dope. It only seems to be everywhere. In reality, it hides in certain places, certain spots, and if you know where those spots are, you can shut the window before it gets in you.

One place dope hides is in the moment when the dope boy asks you for your money. Another place it hides is in the turn that goes to the dope spot...If you're alert, and you know about the places in the world where dope hides, you can stay not getting high. The trick has two parts. The first part is to be alert when you're passing the place where the dope is hiding. The second part is to not snatch the dope out of that place and do it. This two-part trick is called a "choice."

"If you don't pick it up, it won't get in you." That was the invention of choice for me. My life wasn't like a ball rolling down the hill into the dope-hole anymore. I don't want to overemphasize the power of choice. It didn't exactly turn my life into an airplane, either. It was more like a hollow ball with a little hole in it for a window and a tiny mouse inside. By leaning hard one way, the mouse can alter the direction of the roll. It's a very sleepy mouse, and it can't pay attention all the time. But it can learn to recognize a couple simple signs and when it sees them, to sit up and pay attention (2013, 238-9)

Like Gabriel, Clune points out that choices are constructed. Prior to deliberately constructing a choice, one may indeed feel like a ball rolling down a hill. Gabriel attributed this feeling to his belief that alcohol had power over him. To Clune, heroin was omnipotent and omnipresent.

Clune unpacks the concept of choice as a process. His elegant analogy of a mouse in a hollow ball with a tiny window aptly illustrates the limitations on a person's ability to adopt a completely transcendent, God's eye view of himself. Being in a ball on a hill, the mouse is on a topography not of its choosing; it is not like the pilot of its own airplane who can fly wherever it wishes. Recovering addicts are thrown into social and economic contexts they cannot transcend. They cannot simply will their lives into becoming certain ways. "Choice" is a multi-step process. Thoughts, feelings, and actions must become available to a person as interpretable signs. He must pay attention in order to apprehend these signs as he encounters them, and then distance himself from his own actions. He needs to have access to optional courses of action that he interprets and doable and desirable. This constant labor, in the form of a mouse with limited vision and power, characterized how my informants stayed stopped.

## CHAPTER IV

### Likeness and Truth-Telling

The virtue that I heard about most often was honesty. It took various forms. Greg said he disclosed his alcoholism to his employers to ensure his workplace does not have a drinking culture and to have people keep an eye on him. Someone else said he never discloses his alcoholism to insurance companies. Doing so might raise his premiums, which is a financial burden and a hindrance to his usefulness to his family. Maggie, the woman who moved to Austin to work in the entertainment industry, used to tell everyone all the details of her sobriety, but came to realize she did not need to tell everyone everything in the name of honesty. For Alan, rigorous honesty means being fully honest with himself and his Higher Power about his motives and intents. However, there are only five people he trusts enough so that he will “dump the contents of his purse” in front of them; that is, disclose what is going on with him in its entirety. He also said there are three acceptable answers to questions about oneself, depending on context: a truth, a lie, and “none of your business. When asked “How do you know you’re being honest?”, people tended to start with an intensional definition like “Honesty is...”, but as they thought it through while talking, they began to take account of how context alters expression of honesty, and gave examples of honest behavior in different situations.

They rebuilt their life based on virtues like rigorous honesty. Before they can do this, they need to know what counts as honest behavior. The concept of honesty has recognizable qualities, but when evaluating everyday behaviors, it is not self-evident which behaviors can be grouped together under honesty or dishonesty based on what qualities they share. For example, no one objected to not disclosing addiction to health insurance companies because it is dishonest. Nondisclosure is something else; practicality, perhaps. Nelson Goodman (1972) observed that similarity cannot be measured in terms of possession of common characteristics, because any two things can have exactly the same number of properties in common as any other two. Whether things become established as similar depends on frame of reference, who makes the comparison and when, and his or her purposes and interests. My informants engaged in an

ongoing pedagogical process to gain practical mastery of acting honest in different situations. This required a mode of reasoning in which they learned to recognize honest behavior through extensional definitions, or making relations of likeness and analogy.

Rigorous honesty is one aspect of a broader phenomenon which I will call truth. Recognizing what is true and speaking the truth is so fundamental to recovery practices that it requires an extensive look. I will begin with historical truth-telling speech genres that shaped the ways in which my informants spoke, and the ideologies that underlie the linkages made between speech and truth. I will then explore the role of an other in truth-telling, and end with examples that illustrate the proper way to tell the truth.

### ***Truth-Telling Speech Genres***

As a kind of equivalence-making that the ethnographer undertakes, I approach the truth-telling in AA as partial replicas of historical genres: ancient Greek practices of *parrhesia*, Christian confession, and psychotherapy. These genres do not exist in pure form as practices, but make up, in Heidegger's terms, systems of reference in which truth-telling interactions are possible. Within these systems of reference, there are discursive tools that my informants picked up through encounters with various institutions. The tools they find at-hand depend in part on their own personal historical trajectories.

Foucault examines *parrhesia*, a term found in various ancient Greek writings which Foucault translates as free speech, plain speaking, speaking openly, or frank speaking (2001, 2012). This practice is not epistemological. The speaker of *parrhesia* speaks what he believes to be the truth, and "is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse" (2001, 12). Telling the truth about oneself took place when examining one's conscience, exchanging letters, and writing in notebooks or journals (2011, 4). Truth-telling was a practice of care of the self, and "proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you" (1997, 287). The function of truth-telling is criticism of the speaker or the interlocutor rather than flattery: "'This is what you do and this is what you think, but that is what you should not do or should not think.' 'This is the way you behave, but that is the way you ought to behave.' 'This is what I have done, and was wrong in so doing'" (2001, 17). Truth-telling in *parrhesia*, Christian confession, and

psychotherapy all rely on the presence of another person to whom one speaks, who listens, and speaks themselves (2012, 5).

Telling the truth involves risk (Foucault 2001, 15-6). For example, sponsors run the risk of being fired. Chris said this eventually stopped bothering him because his sponsee is taking responsibility for his own sobriety. But he did mind the first time he was fired. He thought, What did I do wrong? He can't blame me for the work he's not doing! But he took it personally, he said, "when it didn't have anything to do with me. The guy [his former sponsee] ended up working with, I could see through him. [His sponsee] went back out. And my little ego was like, 'Yes!'" Chris said, "I'll tell them, I don't know if I'm right. All I can use is my experience. This is what I see. Honestly, most times I'm right. Just trying to get them to back up and see the bigger picture." He said all of his sponsees have told him "fuck you" at least once when he pointed out things they were doing that they didn't want to hear. He said, "One of them met this person who I think has a dubious reason to come to meetings: to pick up new guys. He makes a lot of money and has a really nice house in a really great part of town. He's hanging out with this guy who relapsed. I looked at him and said, 'Look, I told you. Your ego's out of control. This guy—you cannot work his program. You need to quit.' 'Fuck you.' That's fine."

*Parrhesia* must be appropriately exercised. According to the *12 x 12*, "intimate and harrowing aspects" of an alcoholic's experience are meant for the sponsor's ear alone, rather than shared in a meeting or indiscriminately with others (AA 2007, 185). In Austin, people generally understood that some topics were best shared with sponsors. People commented to that effect after someone shared something a little too personal in a meeting. My informants felt free to discuss incidents from their past or current troubles with whomever they liked, but they generally saved their deepest and darkest secrets for discussions with their sponsors.<sup>24</sup> Because of this, I witnessed and recorded only a few of these interactions.

Given that people disclose their most serious problems with their sponsor, a trusted authority figure, these interactions bear some resemblance to confession. Since the middle ages, Western societies have established confession as one of the main rituals by which truth is produced (Foucault 1978, 58). It became their duty to explore who they are, what is happening within themselves, and the faults and sins they committed (Foucault 1997, 178), and to tell these

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<sup>24</sup> An exception is illegal activity. A couple of people told me they warn their sponsees not to tell them about illegal activities because that their interactions do not have the privilege that, say, confessions with a priest or doctor-patient conversations enjoy in a court of law.

things to someone in authority, who listens, judges, and then proscribes penance or proper conduct (Foucault 1988). Christian confession involves “the examination of self with respect to the relation between the hidden thought and an inner impurity...It implies that there is something hidden in ourselves and that we are always in a self-illusion which hides the secret” with the ends of renouncing the self (1988, 46,48). Protestants removed the requirement of confessing to a priest, replacing it with a notion of a disciplined character. For Protestants, each person is inhabited by an individual conscience, and must scrutinize their thoughts and actions for failings (Rose 1989, 224). Despite AA’s founders deliberate attempts to separate alcoholism from sin, the notion of character defects resembles sins. Only one’s Higher Power can remove them, according to Steps Six and Seven. In addition, the 12 x 12 refers to the seven deadly sins as a heuristic for understanding character defects. Thus, sin as identified with proscribed acts, immoderation, sexual license, or failure to adhere to norms operates conceptually (Mercadante 1996). Chris said that the 12 x 12 was written years after the Big Book, after many people had relapsed. Regarding the deadly sins, he said, “Not everything is selfish, self-centered, dishonest, fearful.<sup>25</sup> Pretty much, [the seven deadly sins] are what we are. If we look at our character defects, they have names. It’s like people who say, the only emotions are fear and love. Really? Really? It’s way too simplistic for me.”

AA’s literature is heteroglot. The Big Book contains tools taken from Christianity, business management, and psychotherapy. Its emphasis on surrender to God, admitting powerlessness over alcohol, renouncing “self-will,” and “carrying the message” to other alcoholics draw from Pietist evangelicalism (Kurtz 1979). Step Four, the personal inventory, is overtly taken from business management. It is an example of the techniques of bureaucratic rationalization seeping into multiple areas of our lives (Weber 2003), and also a permutation of “Know yourself.” As the chapter “How It Works” states,

A business which takes no regular inventory usually goes broke. Taking a commercial inventory is a fact-finding and fact-facing process. It is an effort to discover the truth about the stock-in-trade. One object is to disclose damaged or unsalable goods, to get rid of them promptly and without regret. If the owner of the business is to be successful, he cannot fool himself about values (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001, 64).

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<sup>25</sup> The chapter “How It Works” in the Big Book lists these four character defects in its directions on how to perform Step Four, the personal or moral inventory.

According to the 12 x12, alcohol is “the rapacious creditor, bleeds us of all self-sufficiency and all will to resist its demands. Once this stark fact is accepted, our bankruptcy as going human concerns is complete” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2007, 21). Bill Wilson, the primary author of both books, may have been particularly susceptible to including these tropes due to his career as a businessman.

AA literature also draws from therapeutic discourse. “Denial” is a Freudian defense mechanism. Alan’s category “making oneself vulnerable” draws from therapeutic discourse. The term therapeutic discourse as I am using it is a semiotic resource consisting of a set of linguistic practices with an institutional base in research and clinical practice. It is found in an array of cultural and social locations such as TV shows, publishing industry, corporations, schools, prisons, and numerous support groups (Illouz 2008). The organization distinguishes the work of its members with that of professionals. The pamphlets “AA at a Glance” and “A Brief Guide to AA” state that AA is not a medical organization and does not provide psychiatric advice or make psychological prognoses. “How AA Members Cooperate with Professionals” explains that AA’s program is not based on scientific or professional expertise, but first-hand knowledge based on personal experience. Nevertheless, therapeutic discourse appears in shares in meetings and in interactions.

Here’s an example from an exchange between two friends, after Jason shared about his first relapse, which took place after a meeting. I scribbled down highlights from this conversation right after it occurred as examples of resignification of behavior. Jason had been out the night before after a stressful day and took one drink. He told Luke he had slapped himself while driving home. Luke was taken aback when he heard this, and expressed concern about Jason’s perfectionism and need for self-control.

1. Luke: You tend to do a lot of black and white thinking. Either you never drink, and you’re a winner, or you drink, and you’re a loser.
2. Jason: I called myself a loser last night. I have a tendency to beat myself up.
3. Luke: Literally [laughing gently]. You had a slip. It’s not the end of the world. You drank one drink and then stopped. You talked to Ethan [Jason’s boyfriend] about it, then you called all these supportive people the next day. What matters is what you do about the slip. You did the next right thing.
4. Jason: I blew eleven months.

5. Luke: What good things did you do during those eleven months?

Jason didn't respond, and Luke continued.

6. Luke: You got your degree. You're starting to work in the career field you're interested in. You developed a good relationship with Ethan. You're helping your family. Just because you drank last night, none of that's been taken away.

7. Jason: I never thought about it like that.

8. Luke: When I go to meetings and hear oldtimers say, Oh my God I relapsed and lost 20 years or whatever, I'm like, You didn't lose 20 years. You lost a day. It isn't like money in the bank. You don't lose eleven months like you lose money.

9. Jason: It's really easy to turn all this into rationalizations. Like, Oh yeah, I just had a slip, no big deal.

10. Luke: I'm not saying it's okay you took a drink, and you don't sound like you have an attitude of no big deal. The Big Book discourages us from kicking ourselves and calling ourselves an asshole.

11. Jason: On the way home, I was thinking to myself, Ethan is going to leave me. I'm going to lose my job.

12. Luke: That's catastrophizing. The first time around, you almost lost your job. This time, you did what you needed to do and you didn't lose your job. And you need to let go of this obsession with control.

The conversation is an example of the heteroglot nature of AA interactions. It combines therapeutic discourse with home-grown AA wisdom. Luke had at-hand two types of discursive event taken from therapeutic discourse, "black and white thinking" and "catastrophizing." These are examples of cognitive distortions identified by cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (Beck 1972, Burns 1989). Luke engaged in what Michael Silverstein (2005) terms a "type-sourced" interdiscursivity. A discursive event on one occasion has a potential relationship to a discursive event on some other occasion. These events may form a set defined by perceived likeness, or iconicity. Being in a set grouped by likeness is also an indexical relationship of co-occurrence within a frame. When Luke claimed "I'm a loser" = black and white thinking in section 1, and "I'm going to lose Ethan and my job" = catastrophizing in section 12, he presupposed a source for that likeness. In presupposing a source, he could draw a relationship with another discursive event, in which case the likeness is "token-sourced," or with an internalized notion of a type or

genre of discursive event, in which case the likeness is “type-sourced.” In the above conversation, Luke’s categorization of Jason’s utterances is type-sourced. The cognitive behavioral therapy he underwent in outpatient treatment provided cognitive distortions as types of discursive events.

If Jason accepts these type-sourced equivalences, he could perhaps bring his thoughts in alignment with an external reality. Jason’s attention is focused on his drink the night before, while Luke draws his attention to what he did afterwards. In section 2, Jason makes the equivalence “drinking the night before = loser.” In section 3, Luke draws Jason’s attention away from that equivalence and directs it to the discursive event “talking to others about it,” a token of the type “doing the next right thing.” “The next right thing,” along with “One day at a time” is an AA slogan that temporally rescales a problem to make it manageable, a rescaling practice I will describe in more detail in Chapter 5. Jason was concerned with a timeless, possibly eternal problem – his essence as a loser – while Luke was concerned with the temporal ordering of minute practices on a much narrower timescale. In section 8, Luke continues rescaling Jason’s experience in response to Jason’s remark in section 4 about blowing eleven months. He implicitly critiqued AA’s practice of counting time spent sober, an example of the slogan “Take what you want and leave the rest,” which acknowledges and accepts internal critique. Luke points out that the eleven months, minus one day, was filled with accomplishments. Thus, Jason’s loss is limited to a tiny fraction of that time. In section 9, Jason identified the risk in Luke’s pep talk: that Jason will turn the encouraging words into rationalizations that minimize the danger of drinking. This is related to the tendency for alcoholics to see themselves, or a part of their minds they identify as alcoholic, as deceptive tricksters.

Sarah, whose interaction with Maggie will be described later in this section, also participated in outpatient group therapy and experienced CBT. Alan underwent inpatient treatment after a DWI arrest. AA participants such as these carry interdiscursive tools with them into meetings and interactions, where they are picked up by those who have not undergone therapy. For example, Maggie had not undergone therapy or treatment, but incorporated pieces of discourse such as the “hula hoop.” Some AA members described hula hoops in treatment to teach clients about boundaries. The hula hoop placed around the body is an icon of proper boundaries. In one conversation we had about Maggie’s problems in dealing with coworkers, she mentioned that a coworker’s actions were “outside her hula hoop,” and therefore out of her

control. She cannot control things outside the hula hoop – other people’s behavior. She can control things inside the hula hoop, her *reactions* to other people’s behavior. The prevalence of therapeutic discourse is not surprising given its pervasiveness in myriad spheres of contemporary U.S. life (Cushman 1995, Furedi 2004, Herman 1995, Moskowitz 2001, Rice 1998, Travis 2009, Weiss 1969). It is taken for granted that psychological experts have a place in debates about American society (Herman 1995). Other examples I frequently heard, and appear in transcripts in this dissertation, include other Freudian concepts such as “feeling less-than,” or having an inferiority complex, and describing a response within a situation as a “defense mechanism.”

According to Chris, there are people who openly disparage therapeutic concepts (and sometimes psychotherapy itself). Trysh Travis (2009) traces the rise of therapeutic discourse both within and outside of AA in the decades after WWII. In the midst of political and social changes, the expansion of the alcoholism treatment industry and increased publication of recovery self-help and memoir resulted in hybrid, “feminized” versions of recovery. These hybrid versions combined the Twelve Steps and other American ideas about the self, causes of unhappiness, and how one might become happy. In a departure from AA’s traditional universal notions of alcoholism, the new recovery culture, and AA itself, became sensitive to the experience of women and minorities. However, largely male “traditionalists” within the organization resisted the infiltration of treatment center-based rhetoric and identity politics. I encountered this attitude a few times. For example, the idea of alcoholics making amends to themselves does not appear in any AA literature, but was something commonly mentioned during meetings. However, other meeting participants occasionally criticized this practice as unorthodox. I heard more than once that meetings are not group therapy, and that shares should follow the “experience, strength, and hope” model. At one meeting, a woman with a fairly long period of sobriety had been attending the meeting for a few weeks. In a share that violated the rule of “no cross talk” during meetings, she criticized the regular members for treating the meeting like “group therapy,” because rather than talking about their experience, strength, and hope, they talked about their feelings as they would to a therapist.<sup>26</sup> It doesn’t seem possible to completely eliminate therapy-speak, however. Garrett, a gruff Southerner with over thirty years experience mentoring other alcoholics, frequently bemoaned the leakage of therapeutic discourse from rehab into AA. Yet even he is not immune to the discourse. He frequently spoke of the

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<sup>26</sup> To cross talk means to respond directly to another person’s share in a meeting

importance of “separating feelings from facts.” CBT teaches that this is a variant of emotional reasoning, a cognitive distortion (Burns 1989).

There were other concepts that traditionalists objected to, such as the need to build a healthy ego. These issues came to AA from the “feminized” therapeutics described above, but taken up by both men and women. When I read the Big Book and heard attendants’ comments about self-will, submission, and ego in meetings, this was to me clearly a gendered issue. Bill Wilson was a white, middle-class man who could afford alcoholism treatment at a time when there were few options, and enjoyed the privilege of choosing whether to adopt a stance of submission. Bill worked on his tendency toward grandiosity and desire for fame and glory with a spiritual advisor (White 1998). Women and people of color in his time and contemporary times do not necessarily enjoy this privilege. Certainly not all men enjoy it either.

Critics have approached the pervasiveness of therapeutic discourse in American culture as a critique of modernity or secularism, as the “triumph of the therapeutic” has occurred at the expense of cultural values and religion (e.g., Rieff 1966, Taylor 2007). Critics have also critiqued therapeutic discourse as depoliticization of social problems (Herman 1995), and the rise of the “psy” disciplines in terms of earlier Foucaultian notions of governance (Rose 1989, 1998). Some of the above critiques of the therapeutic can be observed in interactions and meetings. The social and political contexts of suffering are generally not discussed, for example. Yet that does not mean individual actors do not engage in social and political critique; many do in their outside lives. Illouz (2008, 4) argues that critics, particularly those who employ early Foucault, who use sweeping concepts such as “biopower” or “governmentality” do not take the critical capacity of actors seriously and collapse complex social worlds into those concepts. Her observations apply to my informants. As Luke’s statements demonstrate, they critically engage with the tools they find at-hand. They also use these tools towards other ends than being productive citizens. For them, virtue as end in itself.

### *AA Language and Authenticity*

Groups are autonomous and can hold meetings however they wish, but one nevertheless knows that one is in an AA meeting. What makes them similar to each other? There are certain items, practices, and language that make one AA meeting like another. In particular, the 12 x12 and the Big Book make a group of alcoholics recognizable as an AA group. Meeting places tend

to have poster-sized versions of each of the Twelve Steps and Traditions hanging on the wall, and also small framed AA slogans such as “One day at a time.” Groups also carry small circular medallions called chips that commemorate some length of sobriety; at the time of my research in Austin, the lengths were 24 hours; one, two, three, six, and nine months; one year; eighteen months; and a chip for each subsequent year. The 24 hour chip was referred to as a “desire chip” because it was said to signify “a desire to remain sober for the next 24 hours” or “a desire to try our way of life for the next 24 hours.” Polonius’ advice to Laertes, “To thine own self be true,” is printed on the front of the chips. They take this saying at face value, ignoring its satirical presentation in *Hamlet*.

After attending enough meetings, in the absence of coffee pots, chips, books, posters, or other objects, it becomes apparent that the language used by AA groups is alike. The most common segments of discourse are its slogans. Most slogans are taken from the Big Book but its most famous slogan, “One day at a time,” does not originate there. It has probably been around since the early days of the Fellowship. “Let go and let God” and “Thy will not my will” are improvisations from passages about surrendering one’s own will to God. Phrases taken from the Big Book include Higher Power, letting go of old ideas, easy does it, live and let live, first things first, and living life on life’s terms. Fluency in AA’s language may be a representation of the speaker’s inner state, that he is truly recovering, according to the language ideology of inner reference. Alan understood this and used it to “flip the script” as a tactic to manipulate judges and counselors. But it could also be inauthentic if there is a mismatch between words and one’s insides. Chris said, “There’s a guy in New Orleans they call Big Book Henry. He can quote the book, but he’s crazy. A mess. But he can quote the book. I’d sit there and think, I can quote the book. I can study that. I know me, I can do that. It’s not a problem. I also knew that that would do me no good. There’s no meaning behind it. It’s just words.” Big Book Henry’s insides were crazy, thus creating a mismatch between that and his recovery speech. In cases like his, listeners also become annoyed because these are assertions of authority or superior knowledge. This violates the unspoken assumptions governing talk in a meeting (Grice 1975). A meeting occurs among equals who share their experience, strength, and hope, not show off. One could describe one’s alcoholic condition using only catchphrases: “Before I came into these rooms, my disease ran my life. I was like, I want what I want when I want it, then I got sick and tired of being sick and tired. Alcoholism is a fatal, progressive disease. While I’m talking, my disease is out in the

parking lot doing push-ups.” For many of the people I spoke with, their irritation with particular meetings was proportional to the amount of “AA speak,” or slogans, in the shares. Chris dismissed slogan-riddled shares with a shake of his head: “They’re just trying to look good. I used to do that. I used to try to say the right things so I looked good. I kept relapsing.” Popular culture is rife with examples of the slogan aspect of AA. For example, David Foster Wallace lampoons the language in *Infinite Jest*. A resident at a treatment center states,

So then at forty-six years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés... To turn my will and my life over to the care of clichés. One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go. Keep coming back (1996, 270).

These aphorisms abound. Alcoholics are advised, “Have an attitude of gratitude” and “Fake it ‘til you make it.” There are also acronyms. Two warn of conditions that may lead back to drinking. HALT asks an alcoholic, “Are you hungry, angry, lonely, or tired?” The point being, if your agitated state is due to these feelings, take care of them rather than drink. BLAHS tells alcoholics to watch out for when they are bored, lonely, angry, horny, or serious. These feelings get people drunk, according to my informant Alan. “Serious” means taking one’s own thoughts too seriously and taking God too lightly, he said. Another acronym is FEAR, which could mean either “false events appearing real” or “face everything and recover.” These aphorisms are actually quite useful. How HALT works will be discussed in Chapter 5. Marianne Valverde (1998) refers to these slogans as *hupomnemata*, a term taken from Greco-Roman ethics for collections of practical wisdom accumulated over time that are put together from fragments. These “guides for conduct consisting of borrowed bits of wisdom” (1998:136) are collectively authored and reflect the ethical work and wisdom of the past. Individuals take up these bits of collective wisdom and adapt them.

Another type of honesty has to do with one’s intent. In these instances, my informants draw upon the personalist theory of meaning (Duranti 1988, 1993a, 1993b), which privileges the speaker’s intent in determining meaning. People evaluate others’ shares for hidden motives. James criticized the use of “you” instead of “I” during shares, particularly when people speak of what “you” need to do to stay sober. “You’re in lecture mode,” he said. “You go from authentic to asshole.” For James, the use of the second person indexes a hidden motive to exercise superiority and control others. Maryam, Kate, and Evelyn used the term “Big Book thumpers”

when criticizing those who assert the truth and authority of the Big Book over anything else. Their view is common among members who do not identify as religious. “Big Book thumping” is a play on “Bible thumping,” and expresses a wariness of proselytization. They and other non-religious people feel like a beleaguered minority in Texas, and to them, Big Book thumpers are the equivalent of Christian fundamentalists promoted their interests in Texas politics. In their view, Big Book thumpers are not simply trying to teach others to use AA’s program, but are trying to restrict freedom of interpretation.

Alan in particular contrasted honesty with “manipulation.” As one example, he said he discussed making an amends to a former boyfriend with his sponsor. His sponsor asked him what his motives were. He answered, “To repair that relationship.” His sponsor asked why, and Alan’s answer was, “To get into his pants again.” His sponsor said, “You don’t get to make that amends.” The sole purpose of an amends is to attempt to set right what one did wrong. When he brought up this amends to his sponsor, Alan hid his intent to try to sleep with his ex-boyfriend. Evelyn gave an example of rigorous honesty that involved her daughter. She had tripped and fallen on the sidewalk outside of her house and blackened her eye. She had been keeping this from her daughter because she did not want to be “lectured” by her. But in the morning prior to my visit, she said she did not put on makeup and told her daughter what happened. Her daughter said, “Are you okay?” and did not pursue it further. Not telling someone about a fall is not in and of itself a lie, but Evelyn’s intent made the omission dishonest. She did not omit the fact that she fell because it was irrelevant. She omitted it because she hoped to obtain a particular behavioral response—not getting a lecture. Manipulating others’ behavior violates the principle of not playing God (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001, 62); in other words, not attempting to control others. Maryam identified her trouble of “being honest about little things” as an ongoing issue in remaining sober. She said that, for example, if someone asks her somewhere and she does not want to go, she will say “I have to work” rather than “I don’t feel like it” so that she would not hurt their feelings. Again, this is dishonest because of her intent, which is to manipulate others’ feelings. For my informants, having one’s speech match one’s intents is the proper way to relate to other people.

My informants also contrasted honesty with shame. Adam said that part of how telling facts about himself helped him was “to just get it out there and not carrying the shame and the secrecy which was a big fuel for addiction.” Adam’s linkage of shame and secrecy with

addiction is resonant with the idea that “secrets keep you sick” that the social workers described by Carr (2011) espoused, but there are moral implications beyond avoiding relapse. When Adam “put it out there,” he was not simply hoping to avoid engaging in his addictive behavior. He was attempting to strengthen his character by standing firm in the face of possible judgment from others. He would invite others to evaluate him and live with their judgment rather than avoid it. Chris and Alan’s honesty about their sexuality, which occurred decades ago in both cases, took place in an American context in which people value open expression of sexuality and are uncomfortable with marriages of convenience. In being authentic, they live in accordance with certain American social expectations, but their openness is not mere conformity to a liberatory discourse against modern sexual repression (Foucault 1978) or American ideologies of personhood that valorize authenticity. As with the piety movement participants studied by Mahmood (2005), their actions are part of a practice of ethical self-cultivation involving criticism, evaluation, and reasoned deliberation.

According to Carr (2011), the notion of “denial” is central to understandings of addiction beyond AA; there is a clinical and cultural conviction that addicts have a tenuous grip on reality and do not recognize themselves. She observes that Americans tend to evaluate integrity and health based on whether a person’s words corresponds with what he or she “truly” thinks or feels. The social workers’ language practices described by Carr “crystallize” this language ideology. A linguistic indicator of denial is the inability of addicts to read their inner states and render them into words, and treatment entails disciplining clients into expressing themselves in an unmediated language that supposedly reveals inner thoughts, feelings, and memories (2011, 4-5). My informants evoked denial frequently in their conversations with me. They tended to use this term to refer to their inability to admit they were alcoholics in the face of mounting alcohol-related negative situations in their lives. Within AA however, the question of whether one is an alcoholic, and whether one’s perception accurately describes a state in the world, are in part resolved through interaction with others. In sobriety, Alan said that rigorous honesty in part “means [being] honest with myself, making sure my filters don’t get in the way of my accurate perception of what the situation is. So I solicit and enlist help from people who have earned credibility with me to help me with my perceptions.” In their interactions, alignment with “reality” comes about through an intersubjective process which takes place in a shared world.

### ***The Other: To Whom to Tell the Truth***

Truth-telling must include an other. I heard the phrase “I need other alcoholics to call me on my bullshit” many times. People also spoke of needing “other eyes” on them to keep them honest. AA stresses an essential sameness among alcoholics, and people often said they could share anything with the fellowship. Someone told me that no matter what he did, there was someone who had done worse, so he could say anything. The fellowship can be compared to Aristotle’s notions of virtuous friendship. In the *Magna Moralia*, Aristotle states that it is not possible to know oneself, one’s qualities, motives, and abilities without friends (Cooper 1979). Other alcoholics “working the program” may be seen as virtuous friends. Aristotle considered these “another self” because they have a similar character to one’s own self (2000, 168), and friendship with other virtuous people is necessary because “a sort of training in virtue emerges from good people’s living in each other’s company” (2000, 178). Friendship therefore involves working together in a virtuous activity.

Foucault said of friendship among gay men in “Friendship as a Way of Life,”

A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics (1994, 138).

Something similar happened among the people I observed. They often marveled that they felt so close to people they would not have ordinarily met because they would not have crossed paths, or they may have dismissed them as not a possible friend based on other social categories and hierarchies. Alcoholics formed friendships along “diagonal lines [they] can lay out in the social fabric” (1994, 138). For example, Adam had sexually molested three children. A child molester is one of contemporary America’s worst monsters. Adam asked Tom, a highly respected member of the fellowship, to be his sponsor. However, Tom initially brushed him off. Tom said he hesitated to work with Adam because he was a sex offender until he heard Adam speak at a recovery workshop. Adam was asked to tell his story at a 12-Step workshop on rigorous honesty. He said, “There is a level of honesty where you tell facts.” He decided to share facts about the criminal case pending against him because sharing facts about his addiction and where it took him helped him and would hopefully help others. He said we need a web of relationships with a number of people because we cannot depend on just one or a few. Honesty about oneself and

listening to the honesty of others without judgment form the basis of those relationships. But most of all, he said, “There was a level of honesty beyond [telling facts]. A kind of emotional honesty about who am I really, and what I really think about myself, what do I really think about others, and how do I really relate to people.” This is the concept of authenticity that concerned Alan and Chris in the previous chapter. Americans value this virtue enough that it may override the highly stigmatized status of sex offender. Yet, there is a difference between authenticity and inappropriately spilling out the contents of one’s purse. The difference is contextual. Although Maggie was being authentic by sharing her inner states with people, those people did not perceive this as authentic, but as unwelcome—too much information. It is better to be authentic with the right people at the right time than disclose indiscriminately. Along these lines, Adam did not relate all the facts about his criminal case because it was still pending at the time.

After the workshop, Tom said, “I got a clear and realistic idea of who he was rather than have the labels tell me what to think. His courage and honesty are exemplary. My family has deep Christian roots. You either believe in forgiveness or you don’t. If forgiveness can be earned, Adam has earned it.” Seeing Adam demonstrate authenticity changed Tom’s affective orientation toward him. In the changed mood, he discerned qualities of courage and honesty. Honesty in the form of *parrhesia* creates valued relationships. Tom and Adam’s relationship became occasionally contentious because of differences in their political and religious views. Adam describes himself as liberal, while Tom is a conservative Christian. They had a number of heated exchanges after Tom described Adam’s ex-wife as “evil.” Adam said he composed a long email tirade about the existence of evil. Tom recalled his reply as follows: “I will take time away from my wife, and my dogs, and my career, and my daughter, at some point in the future and explain to him that I do believe his wife has a lot of evil and is exercising evil in the relationship. But not now.” Adam took Tom’s refusal to take up the argument as “an opportunity to grow up. It wasn’t worth it. The relationship we had was more important than agreeing on every philosophical point.”

Seemingly odd couplings like Adam and Tom were common in AA. Ian, who is queer, texted to me a description of a table full of people from a young people’s meeting that met nearby.

They’re talking real shit, relationships and character defects. Not a lot of program speak, but an odd collection of fashion choices like you wouldn’t see at one table. One guy in a

suit. Some sport hoodie bros and sorority hoodie girls. A couple of alterna-queer types. All college-ageish. And the green-haired dyke was the one they were all listening to. Seriously heartwarming.

These friendships outside typical forms of diversity such as class, education, and race formed pockets in which relationships of dependence that downplayed and even devalued individual autonomy could flourish. These relationships and conceptualization of personhood are not what my informants were used to. Most were uncomfortable with the idea of giving up what Bateson described as the Cartesian view of themselves, that their minds were separated from matter. In the case of alcoholics, this dualism manifests as the will versus the rest of themselves. This assumption leads them to believe that they should control themselves and stay strong. The new “way of life” created by these recovering alcoholics consisted in part as a community-guided self-making by community members who did not divide along typical sociological lines. As Duranti (1993a) states, “truth itself becomes an instrument, a mediating concept living in particular practices, through which important social work gets done.”

While the fellowship as a whole is an arena for truth-telling, there is nevertheless a tension between likeness within the fellowship due to the sameness of alcoholics, and likeness produced among individuals through differentiation and hierarchization processes. A ubiquitous piece of advice that circulates around meetings is that when choosing a sponsor, you should choose someone who has what you want; in other words, choose a likeness to a desired future self. I worked the Steps as a participant observer and following that advice, I chose Alan, a gay white man, as my sponsor. Alan was in his early fifties when he met. He had a warm, kindly manner. He always made a point to approach newcomers, tell them he is glad to see them, and encourage them to come back. He expressed interest and excitement in participating in my research. He has almost twenty years of experience in AA, but was never overbearing about it. In meetings, he illustrated the lessons he learned in sobriety with self-deprecating, off-color personal stories. It was also my understanding that at any given time, he had probably the most sponsees of any person in this particular AA group. I admired his wisdom, humor, warmth, and effectiveness, and I may have been hoping to acquire these traits during my participant observation. Chris’ “little voice” told him to take Richard, the “80, 90 pound flaming queen,” as his sponsor for similar reasons. Chris is former military, over six feet tall, and solidly built. Whenever Chris referred to Richard, he lifted his pinky finger up to indicate the man’s size. But

this unlikely sponsor was what he really needed at the time, he said, for him to accept and learn to live with the fact that he was gay. In my case and Chris' case, our chosen sponsors may be thought of as future selves that embody certain desired qualities. I hoped for wisdom. Chris hoped not only to be comfortable being gay, but celebratory about it.

People not only chose a sponsor who embodies their future self, they also chose sponsors with similar status markers. Maggie chose her sponsors after she picked out similarities with them through what they said in meetings. When she was looking for a new sponsor, she was won over by Laura, who was polished and well-dressed, nevertheless asked "Does anybody else in this meeting know what trucker speed is?" While alcoholics in AA insist upon their sameness, there is nevertheless both an implicit and explicit sorting. Alcoholics who still have jobs and no arrest records, for instance, are sometimes referred to as having a "high bottom" while those with jail times, who are homeless, or bear physical markers of addiction such as missing teeth are "low bottom drunks." While the term high bottom drunk smuggles hierarchies based upon respectability into an organization that works to establish egalitarianism, another hierarchy exists based upon how much of a hard core drunk or addict one was. Some assert in meetings, "I'm a *real* alcoholic," a reference to a phrase in the Big Book that describes a person who has lost "all control over his drinking" and "does absurd, incredible, tragic things while drinking" (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001:21). Laura once referred to herself as among the "top 1%" of alcoholics who ended up homeless at some point. Maggie was employed and had her own apartment, but nevertheless had experiences that bear a stigma, such as sleeping with her meth dealer in exchange for drugs. She shared this story with a group of college educated high-bottom drunks over lunch in what looked like a game of one-upmanship. She also made jokes about other members in her group who seemed "like librarians."

Sponsees create equivalences between themselves and sponsors. As Maggie explained choosing her OA sponsor,

I went to my second OA meeting ever, and I was telling my story about day three no flour no sugar, and had these feelings like I could suck a cock for a cookie. Which was funny because it was true. The craving was so strong. Marie wasn't there yet. She showed up late, and when she shared, she told her story about how somebody offered her a piece of white chocolate, and she was like, No, I don't want to break my abstinence, and the person was like, Oh come on, it's just a little piece. The immediate thing that came to her mind was, I could have that piece of chocolate and then I could be in the back giving hand jobs for more white chocolate. And everybody laughed, and my eyes just lit up, and

I looked at her, and inside I was like, I love you so much! I immediately talked to her afterwards and she told me the other girls had told her my story.

I asked, “So it because she expressed what was on your mind earlier?” She said, “Yeah. I related to that so much to the point I was like, Ping! It was like I’m almond butter and she’s cashew butter, we’re a bit different nutty, but we’re both these butters. She even has tattoos. She’s mostly dorky, confident but very fucked up. It just clicks. It’s like chemistry.” Evan likewise appreciated equivalences with the people he chose as interlocutors. When he lived in the Midwest and attended meetings, he could not relate because the other participants were primarily blue-collar, non-college educated middle-aged white people, and this highlighted his sense of alienation as a young black intellectual.

There is a status difference between sponsors and sponsees. Sponsees confess to sponsors, who listen, evaluate, and offer guidance.<sup>27</sup> Sponsors wield authority of a sort, which derives from a number of sources. Although newcomers are at times told to ask someone with one day more sobriety than they have how they did it, groups in my fieldsite, when asking potential sponsors to raise their hands after a meeting, set as criteria at least one year of sobriety and completion of the steps. These criteria establish credibility as a mentor. Authority may also derive from sharing experiences with particular types of substances, or the degree to which one is a “high bottom” or “low bottom” drunk or user. Alan does not sponsor people he says are “too needy” or have psychiatric problems.” However, he said he does not turn people down if they really need help. It is rare that Chris tells someone he cannot sponsor them, but he said, “I can’t relate to everyone.” I asked him to what or whom he can’t relate. He said some drug addicts, for example, he understands heroin “conceptually,” but not the experience. He said, “It’s that they’re not understanding what I’m saying or I’m not saying it in an effective way so they can hear it.” He tried to sponsor a man who was addicted to pain pills. He gave his pills to Chris for safekeeping, and would stop by his house to get his prescribed dose. However, he said he couldn’t get across to the man, who had since gotten another sponsor and has been sober a few years. He said he occasionally gets “fired,” but that he doesn’t mind. “That’s why there’s all these people in AA. ‘There’s a screw to fit every nut.’”

Chris said he and Alan sponsored the most people in their group. The number of people they sponsored ranged from five to nine people in the time of my fieldwork. They were both

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<sup>27</sup> I did not directly hear of abuses in these relationships in my fieldwork, but of course this remains a possibility

therefore well-known, and also enjoyed fairly good reputations among group members. They could both be described as charismatic. Chris mentioned a source of authority that he finds dubious. Some people boast of having “sponsor lineages.” Chris explained this means that “His sponsor was sponsored by somebody who was sponsored by Bill or Charlie or Joe and Charlie.”<sup>28</sup> That’s ego to me. Really? It’s just one alcoholic working with another. Yeah, you’re getting some stuff from my sponsor, but I’ve had lots of sponsors, and no I ain’t special.”

### ***Mood and Truth***

Within these friendships, mood is intersubjectively generated. The other in truth-telling not only encourages speaking the truth, but also affects mood. Alan was a popular sponsor because he generates a warm, loving mood. While Alan and I were talking at my house, he had the following text message exchange with his sponsee Tyler. I will use this brief exchange to illustrate a few points about confronting oneself through honesty about self with others. Alan and Tyler had previously spoken about how Tyler felt left out of social activities.

1. Tyler: I needed to tell someone that I feel invisible
2. Alan: I’m honored that you told me, and it takes courage to say something like that
3. Tyler: I feel like I don’t get invited anywhere and things happen without me
4. Alan: One of the reasons I got up today was to love you

In these texts, Tyler and Alan freely spoke of potentially embarrassing feelings and thoughts. They ran risks in doing so. In disclosing feelings of invisibility and social exclusion, Tyler risked exposing himself to ridicule or scorn, and although the love expressed was platonic, Alan nevertheless risked being rebuked in some way. Alan explained to me that Tyler did a good thing because “making yourself vulnerable” by telling someone what you are feeling is necessary for healing. Doing so can change your feelings and beliefs.

Alan did not categorize Tyler’s texts as, say, whining. He said he can tell if the person “is not present” if they do not listen or focus, but instead “go on and on about current and future disasters in their lives.” For Alan to give the proper help to his sponsees, he needs to know what they are doing when they say something. When Tyler’s first text came in, a question arose for Alan: What kind of utterance is this? Is he merely “going on and on,” or does he require

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<sup>28</sup> Bill refers to Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA. Joe McQuany and Charlie Parmley led Big Book study meetings which were eventually recorded. These recordings are among the most popular recordings of AA speakers.

assistance with a problem? Alan drew a type-sourced relation of likeness between one discursive event, the text, and another. In his response in line 2, he draws a relationship between Tyler's text with a type of discursive action he calls "making yourself vulnerable," a practice that furthers healing. The type "making yourself vulnerable" derives from therapeutic discourse.

Telling Tyler "I'm honored" and "love you" generates a warm, loving mood. Alan picked out qualities in Tyler that did not appear as signs to Tyler; for example, telling someone "I feel invisible" = having courage. In response to Tyler's claim of invisibility, Alan responded that loving him was a reason he woke up. Apparently, Tyler's mood changed and he could apprehend the qualities Alan picked out, and that mood lingered. After the text exchange, Tyler signed up for service work,<sup>29</sup> which he performed later in the week. He did this to be around other people, and signed up to do so regularly. His mood changed the mode of his engagement with social contact. He went from waiting for an invitation to initiating it.

Jason, at the outset of his conversation with Luke, was visibly agitated. His eyes did not focus on one thing for long, darting here and there, and his hand gestures were abrupt and jerky. His voice also had a tone of urgency when he described his actions of the night before. His comportment changed after Luke told him that the good things he did in section 7. As Jason said "I never thought about it like that" in the next line, the agitation left his gestures, face, and voice. Jason had to leave to go to work and ended the conversation, but he said he would download some AA talks on his iPod and attend more meetings. This new mood did not last indefinitely, nor did he morally transform in the duration, for he relapsed again two weeks later, and then two weeks after that.

In addition to establishing an inclination toward engaging in novel action, mood determines in part one's openness to truth-telling. Chris described at length his difficulty in working with angry people. Some, he said, are angry but do not know it and refuse to look at it. I asked him how he knows they are angry. He described their comportment: "There was this guy today. He's very stiff physically. No free flowing motion. You can see they're tense. They're used to it, so it's natural." But the principle way he detects anger is a "reluctance to be open-minded and look deeper." He said, "Even if they're willing, they're not capable." In some cases, the angry mood does not get dispelled, and he eventually asks them to find another sponsor

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<sup>29</sup> Service work is volunteer work that helps other alcoholics stay sober. This does not have to be direct help, like listening to their problems and offering your own experience, strength, and hope, but could be things like making coffee or cleaning up after a meeting.

because he's not doing them any good. He said, "I know you're dancing. I can see you're full of shit, but you can't and I can't get you to look at it any differently." In an angry mood, people are not disposed to reconfigure interpretations.

Discussing one's "character defects" can understandably produce an angry mood. Chris talked about another sponsee who constantly argued with him, particularly while talking about his character defects during Step Four. Chris would ask, "What's your part?" and the sponsee would answer, "I don't know" or "He did this." Chris said, "It's funny when you have someone who's talking about what everyone else did, and they mention something that person does that they do. Just look at them and say, 'Isn't that what you do?'" In those situations, Chris prompts an equivalence-making by asking an unexpected question and surprising his sponsee.

Related to mood are empathic processes that work within these interactions. As many people said, "You can't lie to a liar." Their ability to see truth or its lack in the utterances of other alcoholics, and the ability of other alcoholics to identify their lies, resembles one kind of empathic process described by Hollan (2008) and Throop (2008, 2011). Empathy is a type of affective and imaginative process in which a person emotionally resonates with the experience of another while viewing that situation from that person's perspective. It depends on ongoing dialogue for its accuracy. When Alan's sponsor asked him why he wanted to make amends to that particular ex-boyfriend, he did so from his own experience in making amends. Empathy might also be used to harm another. One of Chris' sponsees, who had been working with him for a while, went to his house to do some Step work while Chris was going through a breakup. Chris said, "He was pushing my buttons to trigger responses. He knew how to make me feel more pain, guilt, shame, fear. Like, 'Joel was a really good-looking guy. You think you'll ever get anybody like that?' And I caught him. I just looked at him. He understood and I understood he understood. He left, and that was it. He never called again."

It is difficult to maintain an analytic vocabulary and avoid words like love when describing relationships among recovering alcoholics. Love facilitates what they experience as truth. People resisted allowing Adam into their 12-Step fellowship because he had molested children, even though the only requirement for membership was a desire to stop their addictive behavior. When I spoke with him and his sponsor Tom, Adam heard for the first time that his appearance at the meetings caused an uproar behind the scenes. People threatening to stop attending meetings if Adam were allowed to attend. Tom, a widely respected figure, convinced

them to let Adam into the fellowship. He said, “I’ll just go ahead and say this. Linda, if you aspire in life to help people, you’ll be very fortunate if you could help as many people as this man has.” When Adam’s prison sentence was eventually carried out, enough people wrote him letters wanting to know how he was doing that he answered them all at once in the form of a newsletter. He wrote in the newsletter that it was meant “primarily as an expression of my personal experience, strength, and hope. I have found that the best way to feel better about myself is to help others feel better about themselves. Now I know no matter how far down I am, I’m not too low to give someone else a boost up.” As a result, he said,

I felt that I had to behave myself because it was almost like I had to set an example. I wanted to be able to share positive things in the letters. I didn’t want to have to report that I lost my temper, and got in trouble, or whatever. So, I was held accountable. I didn’t want to lie. I wanted to have honest positive things to say to this whole crowd of people.

He produced over 500 pages from February 2007 to December 2011, usually writing two newsletters a month. The newsletter generated many letters in return. One inmate joked, “Are you a cult leader?” due to the volume of his mail. This acted as a form of protection for him. He explained that the letters were evidence that he was connected to a lot of people outside, people who would miss him if something were to happen to him, and would raise hell with the system.

Alan said of his sponsor Doug, “I chose to have him as a major part of my life. We’d ride together to meetings, go shopping together, for fifteen years.” The love that formed between the two men showed Alan how to invite “the right people” into his life. Doug was the first person with whom Alan was “out loud” about who he was. When he was in the closet, Alan had a large circle of friends he played poker or hung out at bars and golf courses with, but with whom he pretended to be something he was not. He said, “The people I wanted to hang out with changed when I found out there were people like Doug who accepted me as I am, so I didn’t need pretenses.” It is not only the practical guidance that sponsors provide that enables alcoholics to persist in the labor of recovery. The following text message exchange between Alan and a sponsee is an example how love alleviates suffering. The exchange exemplifies what Alan calls being real:

- 1) Hurting  
9:28 PM
- 2) I’m here

9:28 PM

3) I knew you would be  
9:29 PM

4) ☺  
9:29 PM

5) I think I just need to know  
someone out there loves me  
9:29 PM

6) Oooooo! Pick me! Pick me!  
9:30 PM

7) ☺  
9:30 PM

8) But hey! I think it's more  
important that there is someone  
out there that I love ☺  
9:30 PM

9) I didn't think of that  
9:31 PM  
That it's just as important to love others  
9:31 PM

10) It's true  
9:31 PM  
Yup  
9:32 PM  
It's like breathing  
9:32 PM

11) Inhale \*and\* exhale  
9:33 PM

12) Gotta do both  
9:33 PM

I can take comfort in that  
9:34 PM  
I can be grateful there are  
people in my life I love  
9:35 PM

Gratitude is an antidote to despair  
9:54 PM

That's been my experience too  
9:54 PM

In the above exchange, Alan responded immediately, simply affirming his listening presence. Alan's responses in texts 2, 4, and 6 reassure her that she is loved. But in text 8, he changes frame. They are no longer just two people telling each other they love each other. The conversation becomes a gentle lesson in AA virtues. He said that it is more important to know there are people out there to love, implying that the sponsee's initial stance is self-centered. Yet there is no explicit instruction. He models a stance that does not focus solely on oneself and one's own need to be loved by saying "*I think it's more important that there is someone out there I love.*" This expresses the virtue of selflessness, of caring for others. There is also no criticism of being self-centered in this case. Being loved and loving others are like inhaling and exhaling, two parts of a whole. This particular pair's relationship had been established over several years, so the sponsee was able to quickly pick up on the modeling without explicit instruction. As a result, her mood shifted to gratitude.

Alcoholics may abandon their labor of self-making when they are in particular moods. Sponsors are well aware of this, and tend to respond quickly to messages and calls. They provide a reliable form of care. The self-transformation my informants took on requires sustained attention and labor. One way to sustain this process is to distribute the attention and labor beyond the individual to trusted mentors and friends with whom one tells the truth. Thus, the individual alcoholic does not labor alone, and the love expressed by others and expressed toward others intersubjectively creates a mood that enables further labor.

### ***How to Tell the Truth***

#### *Amanda*

Alan's sponsee Amanda came to him with a resentments involving a person in her home group. In this conversation, Alan taught Amanda how to properly engage in frank speech. According to Foucault, what is at stake in *parrhesia* is "the frankness, freedom, and openness that leads one to say what one has to say, as one wishes to say it, when one wishes to say it, and in the form one thinks is necessary for saying it" (2005, 372). But how does one learn how to

speaking frankly? Amanda related a “Thirteenth Stepping” incident. Thirteenth Stepping refers to experienced AA members taking advantage of vulnerable newcomers for sexual purposes. She went to lunch with some people from her AA group. One of the men, who had hit on her before, sat across from her at the table and said, I need to practice looking into Amanda’s eyes. She said she must have been making faces or something because her friend sitting next to her immediately said he wanted to sit in her seat and they switched seats. Amanda said she should have said something instead of letting her male friend rescue her, and that she had said nothing the previous times the other man hit on her. She said she was mad at herself for not standing up for herself. This anger indicated to her that the lunch incident was a problem to be examined with her sponsor. This conversation also touched upon questions of what does it mean to be part of a fellowship, and what do people in a fellowship owe to each other. The following excerpt is from a recording of their conversation.

1. Alan: You’ve heard of ‘I’ messages? ‘When you X, I feel X. I prefer X.’
2. Amanda: So I can say, ‘When you share your thoughts about me to me, I feel uncomfortable. I prefer if you’d stop.’
3. Alan: That sounds better. When you make boyfriend-girlfriend references to me, I feel uncomfortable. I prefer you leave those things out of our conversation.
4. Amanda: Or not talk to me at all!
5. Alan: As a former “predator” [Alan made air quotes], I can tell you that was a *glaring* character defect that was preventing me from getting my social needs met, but I didn’t know how to deal with it. I hit a couple walls going through that where people said, Stop it! very clearly. I *needed* someone to say no in a loving way [laughs]. The oldtimer men in the group really ought to hear this, to sorta get the chance to help.
6. Amanda: Isn’t this what men’s meetings are for? He can go to a men’s meeting to talk about his problems with women and they can help him out.
7. Alan: Yeah, they can pull him aside and say, You’re making people nervous. Maybe someone can tell him, ‘There are women who come in here who have sexual abuse or trauma, and they can’t deal with your mouth and your lack of boundaries. You need to do something.’
8. Amanda: I told my friend John about this. He said, If I were a fifteen year old boy, I wouldn’t want to be around that guy.

9. Alan: This is not about him as much as it is about you having a place that is safe. If things don't change, I'm afraid that that group might become unsafe for you to go to. There's no anonymity within the group. We share at a group level things that are in the, quote, public domain. In our group, we had similar things. Guys who hit on newcomers. Someone to pull them aside and say, You're risking someone's life here. If they don't feel safe coming here, we may not get a second chance to help someone. If this guy is crazy, I don't want you taking risks.

10. Amanda: Some old dude should do it.

11. Alan: Or two old guys. If it's one on one, it can be mistaken for testosterone. Two on one, the person acting out might have a chance to hear what's being said, maybe be more present in the moment when the conversation is going on. Mostly I want you to know you have power in this situation.

12. Amanda: It's hard to know what's right in a group situation. And there are principles like everyone's welcome.

13. Alan: I've seen AA groups go as far as to ban people. Not always around sexual issues, but about money. People taking money out of the basket. Hey, stop it, this is not a place to get \$20. We're trying to take care of ourselves here, and it's not okay for you to come here and do that. But yeah, there are whole group consciences get called over whether so and so is acting right in a meeting, and it gets really divisive. Are they really trying to get sober? Or are they just trolling for another victim? We had at least one guy in the group that had no boundaries. If it was in his head, it came out of his mouth. Once after a meeting, he pulled me aside, broke down in tears, and said, I need people in my life. I said, Baby, the way you act no one wants to be there. It was hard for him to hear, but he was ready to hear it. Since then I've seen him modify his behavior to become a little more socially respectful of other people. One of the things we do best for each other is to be real with each other. I don't need you to change, but I need you to hear this feedback.

14. Amanda: I guess one of the things I'm working on is the ability to be direct.

15. Alan: Finding a way to be real, to be honest, is in many ways kind. To recognize that this may not be a skill you have, doesn't mean you're a bad person; it's just a skill you don't have. As you become more practiced in the art of self-inventory, those skills grow. You start to recognize what created the resentment, and what's my expectation, and which of my basic needs is involved here. The other thing that helps is I no longer feel like my life is in danger if everybody doesn't like me. So it's easier for me to be direct or honest about information you don't want to hear if I'm not emotionally invested in whether you approve of me or not.

At the beginning of the conversation, Amanda said, "I'm mad at myself for not standing up for myself." Alan did not repeat the phrase "standing up for yourself," yet there was an

understanding between them that she did not do something. Instead, he substituted the following types of discourse: “I” messages in section 1, being real with each other in section 13, and being real, honest, and kind in section 15. These were not stand-alone statements, but responses that reached back to Amanda’s original comment about not standing up for herself (Goffman1981). They redefine what it is Amanda needs to do. She berated herself at first for not standing up for herself, but in section 14, she herself redefines the behavior she needs to learn as “being direct.” Being direct is a form of truth-telling, a way of being real in Alan’s terms. She thus aligned herself with Alan’s redefinition of the kinds of discourse to be mastered. Alan reassures her in section 15 that not having a skill does not mean one is a bad person. This is common in AA; character defects are uncoupled from moral judgments of badness.

The conversation contains one way in which a person learns to tell the truth. The difficult act Amanda called “being direct” gains moral valence as a specific kind of truth-telling. It becomes honesty, which is also realness and kindness. Section 13 explains the spirit of being real: “I don’t need you to change, but I need you to hear this feedback.” Not expecting another to change reflects the ethos of “accept the things I cannot change.” Giving feedback to another person is a kindness because the person is not getting his social needs met with his current behavior. Truth-telling is about getting your basic needs met (section 13). Alan had been working with Amanda for some time, and probably knew her fairly well. I did not ask why he said that he could tell people what they may not want to hear because he no longer feels like everyone should like him. It is probably safe to assume that he suspected Amanda did not assert herself out of a desire to be liked. This is also commonly said of American women in general who do not assert themselves against unwanted sexual attention.

The “I statements” in section 1 and boundaries in section 7 are examples of therapeutic discourse. Making “I statements” are a rhetorical strategy to assert oneself without causing one’s interlocutor to get defensive. An “I statement” is not about what the interlocutor is doing wrong, but about the speaker. The word “boundaries” implies that Amanda’s need to be direct is healthy and acceptable from a therapeutic standpoint. In section 5, he introduced the option of getting older men involved. Amanda’s problem is not one in which she must stand up for herself by herself. This introduces the issue of what role the group has. In section 9, he said, “If things don’t change, I’m afraid that that group might become unsafe for you to go to.” The group being a safe place is something in which people other than Amanda have a stake. In section 5, he called older

men getting involved an “opportunity” for them: an opportunity to give guidance to a problematic member of the group to make it a better place for all, including the problematic member, who may get useful feedback. Alan is often called upon to have these talks with people, such as the example in section 13. In section 12, Amanda expressed concern about her interests versus the interests of other people in the fellowship, and Alan let her know that groups decide whether a particular individual is looking for victims, and may ban that person.

Their interaction was quite warm. Amanda reported that she had trouble being direct with people, yet she spoke frankly with Alan, and the warmth between them likely had something to do with that. Amanda did end up taking action. She told two oldtimers in her group about her discomfort with the man in question. One of them talked to the man about his behavior, but I do not know what was said. He was not banned from the group, but stopped attending for a while.

### *Maggie*

The following conversation contains lessons in how not to tell the truth. Maggie had a conversation with her sponsor Sarah about how to talk to her boyfriend Jamie about her concerns about their relationship. Maggie’s sense of doubt and her fear over what may happen in the relationship led to her conversation with Sarah. The following transcript is also from a recording of their conversation.

1. Maggie: I don’t really trust Jamie. We’ve only been together for two months or so.
2. Sarah: My first sponsor told me that I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop.
3. Maggie: There’s something in the back of my mind that’s like, he could just go sleep with someone and not tell you and you’ll never know.
4. Sarah: Honestly, we have no idea what anybody’s going to do, and we have no control over them. No point trying to control them. He might cheat. Instead of trying to make sure he doesn’t cheat, remind yourself you have the tools to deal with it.
5. Maggie: I thought of that. Seeking reassurance from myself. I guess all that kind of stems from, “I’m not good enough because he went for somebody else.” That’s where that’s coming from.
6. Sarah: Exactly. That you feel less-than.

7. Maggie: I might cheat, though. My heart is telling me to find the right time for the discussion. This is a need that I have to get met. I told him, If I don't have sex with you for two weeks, I'm going to start looking in other places.

8. Sarah: Maybe you don't need to tell him you're going to start looking, because that sounds like a threat. 'If you don't have sex with me, I'm going elsewhere.'

9. Maggie: Yeah, he doesn't need to know six guys hit on me last week. He already knows I'm valuable. He treats me like I'm valuable. I don't need to rub it in his face.

10. Sarah: Exactly.

11. Maggie: I would feel the same way. 'Then go fucking do whatever, because I don't want this pain you're trying to push on me.'

12. Sarah: 'Why are you telling me this?'

13. Maggie: Exactly. I learned that two boyfriends ago. He was like, Don't tell me a guy hit on you at work. I know they hit on you at work. I was like, Oh, you're not my best friend right now, you're my boyfriend. Anyway, I'm going to say this. Last night we met my new neighbor. I said, Hi, I'm Maggie. He said, Hi, I'm, I can't even remember his name. Then Jamie was behind me, and he says, Hi, I'm Maggie's boyfriend. First thing he says. Then he says, I'm Jamie. I'm just like, Where's your identity?

14. Sarah: How do you feel about what Jamie was doing?

15. Maggie: His identity is gone. He's no longer Jamie, now he's my boyfriend. Which means, he's no longer his own human person with his own personality and his own style and his own life.

16. Sarah: Does it feel needy, or...?

17. Maggie: Yes, very clingy. Uh-uh. Not having that. I'm leaving for two months, figure it out while I'm gone. Get back to yourself.

18. Sarah: Possessive?

19. Maggie: I think it's reverse possessive. He wants me to be possessive of him. My jaw dropped, and I had to compose myself. You didn't just say that. You know how I was waiting for the other shoe to drop? Well, the other shoe is dropping, and I'm riding it out to see if it's a heavy shoe or just like a sandal.

20. Sarah: He *is* human.

21. Maggie: He's human. But I'm like, Here it comes. Okay now what? Now that I know what his strengths and weaknesses are, is this compatible?

22. Sarah: When are you leaving?

23. Maggie: Very soon, in a week.

24. Sarah: You have a lot to talk about. Maybe you could prioritize what you want to talk about, because that bothered you a lot

25. Maggie: I think I should ask him

26. Sarah: You don't have to tell him everything you told me just now. Something like, 'You first introduced yourself as my boyfriend to my neighbor. I was uncomfortable with that.'

27. Maggie: This is great. This is what my heart tells me, too. I don't think I have to tell him what I'm feeling unless I really need to, but I need to address the issues that concern me. It was so funny, he was acting like a dog to me. 'Hi! Hi! This is my master! Hi! Hi! This is my master.'

28. Sarah: [Laughing] You don't need to say all this, or as you say, the BU word [break up], but say, here are some of my concerns and go from there.

They enjoyed a cheerful camaraderie during the conversation. In this short segment, there are a number of repetitions in which Maggie echoes Sarah's words, indicating her alignment to what Sarah has to say. Sarah says "waiting for the other shoe to drop" in section 2, which Maggie repeats in 13, and Sarah says "exactly" in 6 and 10, which Maggie repeats in 13; Sarah says "He *is* human" in 20, which Maggie repeats in 21. She ratifies Sarah's point of view in 27, that she will not disclose all of her feelings, but only what is necessary, and also expressed happiness that the two of them agreed on what she thought she should do. Sarah gets to hear Maggie's truth because not only did she says things in meetings that Maggie said resonated with her, but also because she shared a humorous story about a self-inflicted injury incurred while drinking. Another meeting of the minds occurred when Maggie and another AA member were talking before a meeting about feelings. Maggie said that she turned the dial up to 11 with her feelings, a reference from the movie *Spinal Tap*. Sarah, who walked in after the meeting started, included the same reference in her share. Their shared humor facilitated openness with each other, as it did with Maggie and her OA sponsor.

In this excerpt, Maggie first mentions her fear that Jamie will cheat. In 8, 26, and 28, Sarah tells Maggie what truths to leave out. In 8, Sarah draws the metapragmatic equivalence

“start looking” = threat. Maggie provided a detailed description of the encounter with the neighbor filled with her thoughts and feelings. In 26, Sarah identifies the necessary truth within the situation: Jamie introduced himself as Maggie’s boyfriend rather than using his name. She also identified the necessary truth within all of Maggie’s reactions: being uncomfortable. In 28, Sarah suggests omitting another truth: that there may be an impending breakup. Honesty in this example is like Aristotle’s notion of virtue: the truth is best told to the right person (tell your best friend, not your boyfriend, about the guys hitting on you), at the right time (don’t tell Jamie you’re thinking about a break up just yet), in the right way (tell Jamie you are concerned; don’t lampoon him as a yappy dog), and in the right amount (don’t express every single one of your thoughts and feelings).

### ***Nested Replications, Truth Construction***

My informants were quite preoccupied with the virtue of honesty. Indeed, addiction is commonly framed as a disease of denial. In this view, addicts are unable to recognize and speak the truth about themselves (Carr 2011). To speak the truth was to constitute themselves as recovering subjects. Thus, much of what they did consisted of telling the truth about themselves and others to one another.

Truth-telling took place within nested processes of replication. The first type of replication involved the other to whom one tells the truth. Truth-telling in AA is an activity to be carried out with other people; specifically, a sponsor and fellow recovering alcoholics. These necessary interlocutors do not possess special spiritual authority, as with Christian priests, or institutional authority, as with clinicians, but are friends who are themselves truth-tellers. Alcoholics are thought to be alike because they share the same malady, and indeed many people said that they took comfort in knowing they could go to a meeting anywhere and speak their minds. Yet, despite claims of equality and sameness, there was nevertheless differentiation. People chose to speak the truth to people who replicated past experiences or imaginings of a desired future self, and in fact were encouraged to do so. This specific replication facilitated empathic processes that allowed alcoholics to serve as mentors to each other.

Truth-telling has a long history that precedes the formulation of addiction as denial, and each act of truth-telling I observed was a partial replica of these historical genres of truth-telling and truth-performing. These genres included ancient Greek practices of *parrhesia*, or telling all

without concealing things through rhetorical strategies, as a technique of care of the self. In addition, when my informants spoke freely at meetings, they were replicating the oral practices of 19<sup>th</sup> century American alcoholics, who were replicating the testimonies at evangelical tent revivals. The personal stories they shared replicated conversion narratives. When they told their resentments to their sponsors, they replicated Christian practices of confession and disclosures to psychotherapists. Speaking the truth about themselves was the first step in knowing the truth about themselves. To borrow from Bruno Latour, truth does not stand in the middle of a field holding a sign saying, “Here I am.” Truth had to be co-constructed between friends who existed in a shared reality.

My informants did not engage in epistemological debates over how they know that what they know is the truth. As with the *parrhesiastes*, they simply spoke what they believed to be the truth. For example when they went through the Fourth Step, they presented past events as they remembered them. However, they did have some criteria for determining truthfulness, such as the language ideology of inner reference, the personalist theory of meaning, and notions of authenticity in which the outer self matches the inner self. They also employed a mode of argument in which they compared behaviors, forming analogies and relations of similarity between them. A sponsor did not give an intensional definition of truth, but instead provided examples of truthful behavior. Truthfulness was also determined by context; in the insurance disclosure example, not disclosing one’s alcoholism to a health insurance company was not a lie via omission, but a practical financial strategy. My informants were also concerned about the proper way to tell the truth, as in Maggie’s example of what to say and not say to her boyfriend, and how to say it without being hurtful or threatening.

The way in which they identified the conclusion of a particular argument as the truth was primarily affective. They deployed arguments based upon certain ideologies and drew relations of similarity, but a person recognized something as the truth when they had a particular affective response. A common term they used was “resonated.” Another common phrase was “Aha moment.” In Chris’ description of his Step work with sponsees, when they ironically responded “Fuck you” to his observations of them, he knew they accepted the truth of what he said. Their sense of truthfulness was primarily intuitive. Through listening, observing, and doing, people came to recognize truth in its many permutations, things like honesty and authenticity. They learned a mode of moral reasoning in which they made associations between one act of truth and

another. They verified through the eyes of others what count as truth. The next chapter continues to examine this form of moral reasoning.

## CHAPTER V

### **Mood and Extrinsic Forms of Moral Reasoning**

Adam described recovery as “building your life from the ground up.” Tom, who had over ten years of sobriety, described it this way:

How many times have I asked myself, Why can't I just quit my addiction? The addiction becomes the focal point, and that somehow doesn't work. What works is learning how to deal with the problems of sober living. Real friends and honesty are better than trying to maintain elaborate strings of lies. Real respect, not a dishonesty-based make-believe respect. You get better at sober living, and the internal pressure to be involved with the addiction gets less and less.

Tom abandoned a typical American interpretation of addiction as a pathological lack of control which should be dealt with by exercising self-control. Rather than being a matter of will, addiction is a matter of ethics for him. He sidestepped the issue of his inability to quit and instead focused on ethical living as a whole. Echoing the theme of truth in the previous chapter, for him addiction is lies, dishonesty, and make-believe. Sobriety is being real and honest. He is typical of the alcoholics I worked with, for whom sobriety is about neither controlling themselves nor making the correct, most self-maximizing choices.

The Big Book states: “We feel that elimination of our drinking is but a beginning. A much more important demonstration of our [spiritual] principles lies before us in our respective homes, occupations and affairs” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001:19). Thus, the goal is not only to abstain from drinking, but to demonstrate spiritual and ethical principles in every aspect of life. Garrett explained in a Step One workshop he held at his home

If I can't live a spiritual life in my home, I can't live a spiritual life. If I can't live a spiritual life where I work, I can't live a spiritual life. If I can't live a spiritual life in my dealings with the world and other people, then I can't live a spiritual life.

For Garrett, “spiritual” means living life according to the Twelve Steps, which are meant to foster a “spiritual awakening.” He taught that the Twelve Steps are not something you pick up when you are in trouble, but are something you do all day, every day:

That means our family, our friends, our homes, our jobs, when we’re driving on the freeway, when we’re getting gas, when we’re in the supermarket, when we’re at church.

Garrett is typical in describing sobriety as “living a spiritual life.” Another common descriptor is “living life on life’s terms.” The above two phrases contain complex ethical stances. “Living life on life’s terms” removes the alcoholic’s will from the equation; alcoholics do not dictate the terms upon which they will live. The attainment of such a state contains two valued actions: acceptance of conditions beyond the alcoholic’s control and surrender to powers greater than oneself. These actions necessitate exercising the virtue of humility rather than Ego, a commonly mentioned *bête noir* among alcoholics, and not trying to bring what is beyond one’s control into one’s control. There are other ethical ways to relate to them.

What my informants called living a spiritual life, I will approach analytically as executing two techniques: 1) distributing one’s agency over oneself and an ensemble of other agents, and 2) acquiring an extrinsic mode of moral reasoning. I describe sobriety as a neo-Aristotelian striving for practical mastery of exercising virtues – e.g., honesty, selflessness, and humility – in the appropriate way, to the appropriate person, at the appropriate time, for the appropriate reasons in order to achieve their ideal of human flourishing. But first, I will examine the intersubjective establishment of a mood conducive to novel ethical action.

### ***Mood and Interpretation***

In an email exchange with me, Vincent, who had a little over a year of sobriety at the time, described the typical progression of his thoughts during meetings:

1. I’m not like them, they’re really fucked up
2. Oh wait, I am like them! I’m really fucked up!
3. Of course I’m fucked up, I’ve known that forever, I’ve just tried to hide from it
4. Maybe I should shut up and listen to see if they can help me or I can help them
5. Probably not but at least it’s nice to feel like there are people I get and who get me
6. Oh wait, this actually does help me and help them
7. Maybe it’s all (IT=life ALL=life) worth something or another
8. I don’t care too much because at least I feel better

## 9. Back into the world to see if I can do something while I feel ok

Vincent, like others I spoke with, expressed ambivalence about AA's effectiveness, and professed dislike of participating in meetings. The first thought he wrote – "I'm not like them" – is common among the alcoholics I spoke with. For them, identification with the group was never fully complete, but something they rejected and reaffirmed repeatedly.

Within Vincent's description, there are shifts in how he encounters himself, other people, and life as objects to be engaged with. He himself, other people, and life have any number of qualia that may enter semiosis. At first, he interprets particular qualities of the others at the meeting as indexical of a "fucked up" type of person, and excludes himself from that category. They are fucked up; he is not-fucked up. In addition, given his remarks in line 7, he apprehends qualia in his own life that consign to the type "worthless." Line 2 is a response to line 1. In line 2, he says, "Oh wait!" which indicates that he is reaching back into his memory and reminding himself of qualia he shares with the others. They are in the same category of person. In line 3, he says "Of course," referring to the obviousness of the fact that he too is fucked up, a fact he continually tries to hide from.

Line 4 is a metapragmatic comment on the type of interaction he was just having with himself. It was inappropriate in a meeting. He should not be chattering with himself, but listening to the others. He raises the hope that they could help each other. Line 5 is a response to the semantic content of line 4; helping seems unlikely. But, there is another positive aspect of the situation. Since they are all fucked up people, at least they "get" each other. The semiotic linkage of likeness he makes with the others, that they are tokens of the same type and they therefore get each other, engenders a switch in mood: this is "nice to feel." In line 6, he again reaches beyond the bounds of the conversation and reminds himself that help actually occurs in AA. The switch in mood allows him to apprehend other qualities in his life other than worthlessness. Another switch in mood occurs in line 8 – he feels better – and in line 9, he expresses an intent to go "into the world" and do something; the mood serves as a perduring motivation for action.

Vincent and I had a later exchange that elaborated on the shifts in his thinking during meetings. He texted me about a "magical" meeting he had recently attended. I asked him to describe in detail his experience of his thoughts and feelings during that meeting. His emailed account contains descriptions of shifts in mood and signification, and is worth reproducing here at length:

Last week I came in [to the meeting] preoccupied because it was a pain in the ass finding parking and I had a stressful day at work and I'm not sure why I'm still a lawyer but I have to be because I still have 75,000 in law school debt even though I've been paying it off for 8 years and I'd be way less in debt if I wasn't a fucking alcoholic for 7 of those 8 years and drivers are fucking idiots - seriously, they are either suicidal or homicidal, and what is up with my mom? Is she an alcoholic? Why is her life so fucked up? I'm gonna end up like that, probably. No, I'm not but Jesus this day is long and frustrating.

Then I go into the meeting and I can't just say this stuff. I have to sit and listen to the preamble and How It Works, and I'm still barely paying attention but then I take a few breaths during the moment of silence and I care less about the fact that I just paid off \$200 in parking tickets and there goes so-and-so yammering on about how he ACTUALLY FELT GOD AND CAN PROVE IT, but at least he's not drinking and if he needs to come here to say that, that's cool, I need to come here to say some shit too. So we read the stories [from the Big Book] and I think back to how shitty things were when I was drinking and how hopeless I was. And I'm in and out of paying attention to other people droning on about their "experience" their "strength" their "hope" because I don't feel that hopeful but at least we're not drinking, so there's some hope.

Then it gets to this lady I haven't seen before and I realize she's been drinking up every word that everyone has said and is looking kind of rough and when it gets to her, she says, "I'm not sure I'm an alcoholic, but I definitely have a problem and it's really bad and you guys may be on to something here." And she looks fully hopeful at our half-baked, half-going-through-the-motions hope and I start thinking about how doing the steps really fucking did something for me, and of course how I did kind of a mediocre job at them, but also how my life is probably better than it's been, at least since I was a kid, and how a year ago I was in jail with my career potentially in the toilet, and my divorce was maybe the best thing that ever happened to me, or at least I survived what I really really thought was unsurvivable - losing two loves at once, alcohol and [his ex-wife] - and am *doing well*? Am feeling good a fair amount of the time? Of course that lady should feel hopeful! I feel fantastic!

And then this sweet dude walks in dressed in drag to get his 21-year chip and he says the same things I've heard him say a zillion times but you know what? It fucking worked for him and it is fucking working for me, so I really hope it works for this lady and I want to be a part of it working, and at the very least I want to give it my damndest since I've gotten so much out of it.

Prior to going to the meeting, Vincent had been working. As a public defender, he drives to multiple jails and prisons visiting his clients, who tend to be marginalized. These places have a rather grim and hopeless mood. He drives to these places in horrendous Austin traffic. Austin has recently been designated second worst traffic in the country after Los Angeles. Other rankings

place Austin as 13<sup>th</sup> worst city in the United States and 42<sup>nd</sup> worst in the world for traffic congestion.<sup>30</sup> Other drivers were driving in an aggressive mood. Parking is scarce in this crowded city. Vincent therefore enters the meeting in a mood which I will describe as “hopeless” given his later remarks about hope.

The lack of punctuation and run-on sentences in the first paragraph are iconic of a rapid series of thoughts. His hopeless mood disposed him to select unpleasant qualia of the objects he experienced both in his environment and memory, bringing them to the foreground of his attention: his job, debt, other drivers, and his mother. These objects have any number of qualities. But for the drivers, he picked out qualities that indexed for him a homicidal or suicidal mood on their part, and his mother, qualities that index alcoholism.

He carried this mood with him into the meeting and continued to typify people and events as hopeless. However, the structure of the meeting described in the second paragraph did not allow him to seamlessly continue with it, or verbalize his filtered thoughts. Once in the meeting, he had to sit down and be still while the requisite readings are read. His body now at rest, Vincent describes a turning point in his thoughts in the second sentence. While he was still distracted during the readings, during the moment of silence, he takes a few breaths. His body further relaxes, as does his mood. His reaction to unpleasant objects in his surroundings is less extreme than his reactions described in the first paragraph. He still picks out an unpleasant object from memory – \$200 worth of parking tickets – but this thought does not summon other unpleasant objects to keep it company. The man “yammering” about feeling God is irritating, but Vincent attends to some of the man’s other qualities. The man is not drinking, and he is doing something he needs to do (sharing). It is also “cool” that he is doing so, rather than merely an irritant to Vincent. Vincent also creates a relationship of similarity with the man in that he too needs to “come here to say some shit, too.” They have the same needs. In the beginning of the paragraph, he is “barely paying attention.” Toward the end of the paragraph, when they are reading the personal stories at the back of the Big Book, he is “in and out of paying attention.” His former mood, though weakened, still picks up unpleasant qualities in people’s shares. Vincent describes their shares as “droning” and places sarcastic quotes around the words experience, strength, and hope. Although the word “droning” suggests weariness and boredom

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.statesman.com/news/local/traffic-report-ranks-austin-13th-most-congested-city-the-country/4VzQ8Gt1ce6cFmn7Yzki4L/>. Accessed April 18, 2017.

with the shares, things are not as unpleasant as they were—he has *some* hope. He and the others become similar because they all possess the quality of “not drinking.”

A full mood shift occurs in the third paragraph. The turn-taking comes to a woman who Vincent describes as “looking kind of rough,” apparently going through difficulties. She catches his attention. He sees this woman with a drinking problem “drinking up every word that everyone has said” instead of drinking up alcohol. He notes that she “looks fully hopeful.” She had been apprehending the quality of hope in the shares he found irritating and boring. Her mood is infectious, for he is pulled into alignment with the woman—the people at the meeting are indeed “onto something.” He starts to think about how the shares did something for him. His mood allows him to attend to other aspects of his life. He is no longer in jail, his career is no longer in jeopardy, and he survived losing two loves, but not only that, his life is actually better and he is doing well.

Sometimes meetings produce irritation, a mood which may also prompt lessons in how to remain sober. Shares that do not follow the “experience, strength, and hope” model may be the target of criticism. “Drunkalogues” are shares comprised solely of drunken exploits. There is an example of a drunkalogue in the television series “The Wire.”<sup>31</sup> A major character, Bubbles, a heroin addict, has been fifteen months clean but has yet to share what brought him to the meetings. He said, “I used to get so high, you know? Used to love to be high. Y’all seen me on the corner of Monroe and Fayette doing the dope fiend lean, right? Be like this here,” mimes leaning. “Come out of it, be a little more upright. Come to realize people treat me like a lamppost. Hanging flyers on me and shit. Come winter, little kids hanging balls on me like a damn tree.” And on in that vein, making jokes while his sponsor gave him looks urging him to tell people what happened to him. His sponsor later told him, “You know, you hear a lot of funny shit in these rooms. People making fun of their mistakes, making people laugh, but in between all the jokes, there’s a lot of truth to be spoken.” Sometimes drunkalogues foster camaraderie or provide welcome levity, or when they are not funny, serve as grim reminders of backsliding. Or they may incite boredom and irritation. They become lessons in reading motives. Ian disliked men who shared drunkalogues with bravado when attractive women were present. He said this was likely to occur in what his sponsor called “toothbrush meetings,” so-called because people

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<sup>31</sup> The Wire. “Unconfirmed Reports.” Directed by Ernest Dickerson Written by William Zorzi. HBO, January 13, 2008.

presumably took the time to brush their teeth before attending because they might meet someone. Ian learned to avoid these meetings. Ian said that this kind of posturing was absent in all-male meetings. In these meetings, the men were more likely to engage in frank speech about their thoughts and feelings as opposed to speech rhetorically oriented to persuading women of their attractiveness.

During evaluative talk after meetings, people learn the difference between honest expressions of struggle in the spirit of seeking help, and mere “whining.” They also learn what type of speech registers they should use. People in some meetings openly discourage shares that include too much “therapy speak,” bits of therapeutic discourse described in the previous chapter. Chris is also concerned about proper use of language based on the ideology of inner reference (Carr 2011), as described in the previous chapter. For him, authenticity promotes sobriety while pretense does not, and so does not trust oldtimers who never share when they are struggling. He does not think newcomers will learn anything from them. Sometimes, initial irritation leads to reflection. This occurred in the following exchange I had with Maggie. At a meeting we both attended, Monica shared for quite a few minutes. She started with issues she had with her husband, but jumped from subject to subject, occasionally going back to her husband. It was difficult to follow her line of reasoning, and as she was speaking, I noticed that Maggie abruptly dropped her head so that she was staring at her lap. Her lips were pressed into a tight line, and she clasped her hands in her lap. I was interested in her response because Maggie herself often jumps from topic to topic while speaking, and once expressed hurt when someone described her as “manic.” In a recorded conversation we had after the meeting, Maggie brought up Monica’s share.

Maggie: I like Monica, but man.

Me: You looked like you were about to punch her out. I thought you were looking down because you didn’t want to make a face.

Maggie: I was shutting down. It’s obvious that her husband is bothering her so much. She can’t deal with it. I was just like, Shut the fuck up. She kept going and going and going. But I’ve been there. It’s not like I’m better than her. At the very least, she’s reminding me how crazy I could be. So I got something out of it. I don’t know, sometimes I can’t handle it.

Me: Yeah, she jumps from thought to thought.

Maggie: She's a ping-pong ball. She keeps bouncing around. Which is why I said I've been there. I remember, I used to talk like [bouncing sound effects]. So I shut down, and then came back up. Empathize!

Maggie had over a year of sobriety at this point – she had three months when we first met – and had, in her words, learned to be “a movie camera.” Whenever she talked about this camera, she would lift her hand up, miming a movie camera moving up and outward to take a wide shot of a particular scene. She learned to self-monitor interoceptive states. When she sensed her feelings of irritation, she “shut down.” In this change of mood, she perceived qualities she and Monica shared: they can both be “crazy.” Reminded of how people react to crazy people, the share served as a warning to her to keep self-monitoring her behavior.

### *A Higher Power and Distributed Agency*

As mentioned in the Introduction, I chose informants who did not fit the stereotype of an AA member—white, straight, middle-aged male Christian; therefore, few of my informants were unproblematically Christian. Yet I heard even Christians in meetings talk about the need to change their conception of God and form a new relationship with him. Many of my informants found “God-talk” objectionable. Even conciliatory terms like “Higher Power,” or “Power greater than ourselves” kept them away from AA until they said they felt desperate enough to try meetings despite their aversion. Even with regular attendance, the question “What is my Higher Power?” often does not become a settled matter. I approach this step analytically as an attempt to reconfigure the recovering alcoholic from an individual actor to a distributed actor. In the case of these American alcoholics, they attempt to discern the locus from which their actions originate. If they construe the locus to be “self-will,” then in Bill Wilson’s words they are “playing God.” Bill uses other metaphors to describe the proper use of will. God should be the Director in the drama of life; he is a new Employer; he is the Principal and the alcoholics, His agents;. Based upon this footing, alcoholics become less interested in themselves, their “little plans and designs” (AA 2001, 62-3). A properly distributed actor, then, is an extension of God’s will. The consensus about Higher Powers that I observed was simply that one not act out of one’s own will. A common slogan is, “It doesn’t matter what your Higher Power is. As long as it’s not you.” A story often heard in AA meetings is that the speaker chose the doorknob to their room in rehab as their Higher Power. Others turn the word “God” into the acronym GOD, which can stand for

Good Orderly Direction or Group of Drunks. In addition to de-emphasizing individual will, the Higher Power concept also fosters dependence on either a supernatural entity or the fellowship. It is not surprising that many people take issue with the notion of a Higher Power, given that dependence is antithetical to dominant ideologies of personhood in the contemporary United States, which valorize individual autonomy.

Step Two – Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity – is generally undertaken as a conversation between sponsor and sponsee about how a Higher power might be conceptualized. The sponsee does not have to settle upon a definition, or they may simply adopt a provisional conception. Maggie initially referred to her Higher Power affectionately as “Blob,” which signified an unthreatening supernatural entity outside herself and that it was amorphous and subject to change. Maryam and Evelyn, staunch atheists, accepted the fellowship of AA as their Higher Power. In so doing, they do not act alone, but with their sober friends. Alan used a common technique for people who accept the existence of a Power greater than themselves but struggle with negative memories of a religious upbringing. He has them take a sheet of paper and on one side, write down things in a Higher Power that they want, and on the other side, things they do not want. In his speech at the workshop, Adam described working the steps in 2004 after his first arrest. Adam’s sponsor asked him to do the same with the left and right sides of a sheet of paper. On the left side, he listed qualities of his biological father that he had difficulty with: rigidity, emotional distance, and perfectionism. On the right side, he listed the contrasting qualities he desired in a Higher Power: flexibility, accessibility, and tolerance.

Step Three is “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” The Big Book contains two paragraphs on Step Three. The first paragraph suggests the following prayer:

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. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!

This prayer was not popular among my informants. All of them, save Alan, disregarded it. Alan, who understood that the Thee’s and Thy’s were problematic, mentioned the prayer to his sponsees as an optional exercise in renouncing self-will. When I asked Chris about his Higher Power, he said that saying that prayer “drove him crazy” because he could not attain what the

prayer asked for. A guest speaker at his home meeting said that she did not say the prayer because she did not want to be a saint. He took that as permission to stop saying the prayer.

Adam gave me the text of a speech he gave of his personal story in a speaker's meeting in March 2013. He took Step Three in an unusual way. He had been raised in a conservative evangelical Christian household in which God was wrathful and vengeful. In his speech, Adam described an exercise he heard on a tape made by a therapist who helped a client who kept becoming involved in abusive relationships. The therapist had the young woman sit in a chair and address an empty chair the way her mother spoke to her. She then switched chairs and told the empty chair she previously occupied as her mother all the things she never told her mother. The therapist then had his client address the nicest chair in the room as if God were sitting in it, and tell the chair all the things she never told God. She then sat in the nicest chair and told the chair she just vacated all the things she wished she had heard from God. Adam tried this "God exercise," which entailed switching himself between addresser and addressee. He gave the God of the undesired qualities listed in his Step Two "a piece of [his] mind," which he described as liberating. He then switched chairs, and said

What came out of my own mouth blew me away – I talked to myself as I did my own kids in my better moments. As God, I told myself I was a precious child, that I loved me, no matter what, that I was available to help if only asked. I told myself I was completely loveable and loving, a gift to and from the universe itself. I talked to myself the way one would to a child who had been thought lost to violent crime or natural disaster, only to be found again when nearly all hope had been given up. Before long I started sobbing – deep, wracking sobs, so much so I collapsed across the bed. At one point I thought I was going to throw up.

In the above paragraph, introducing the presence of God enabled complex stance-taking. When Adam addressed himself in the second person, he was taken by surprise by what he said. Upon reflection, he said it was the kind of things he said to his children when he was in his role as a good father. The fact that the recording was of a therapist talking to a survivor of abuse played a role in defining the position of the speaker and respondent in Adam's conversation. He addressed himself as a child thought lost to violent crime or a natural disaster.

Using a Higher Power helps one deal with the second half of Step One as a co-agent. Step One states, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become

unmanageable.” Anne, a woman who participated in a recorded First Step workshop, shared her experience with powerlessness and unmanageability:

I was trying so hard to be little miss good AA, good mom, good employee, good good good good good. Using my own willpower and constantly hitting walls and thinking it was something wrong with me that I had control over. It kept showing up in my Fourth Step that I was still seeing myself as lazy. Andrew was the first person to tell me, Maybe it’s not laziness. Maybe it’s lack of power. The obstacle to my recovery and being of service is me thinking I had control over what was happening to me before and after sobriety. Andrew asked me, How long have you been sober? I think at the time it was seventeen years. His response to that – because he could see the unmanageability in my life – was, Nice try. And I’m like, Fuck you and your nice try. I was offended by that because it was all I had. I kept trying, and I’m a good try-er, but I’m not a good let-er go-er. What removed the obstacle to letting go was being told that it was okay to have the feelings that I was having, and that it was okay for me to turn to God and ask God to help me accept myself. Nobody has ever given me the green light to give myself a break. I just thought, My whole life is about struggle and climbing out of the holes I put myself into. It’s a constant cycle of trying. My First Step experience was brutal this time around, but it was the most important, life saving real experience I had in sobriety. A first step experience where somehow I was able to be honest about where I was at even though it didn’t look all that good. Because believe me, when you have eighteen years and you’re still fucked up, people look at you like, What is wrong with you? So it’s been a good reminder for me today that maybe just maybe it ain’t your fault. Like, Whew, I can give myself a break, I can give you a break. I don’t have to be judge, jury, and executioner of anyone in the fellowship. I’m getting better and better at that by the grace of God.

Being a good mom, good employee, good at everything by one’s own efforts is laudable according to the virtue of self-maximization that American society values. This is better than being a drunk mom and employee, and in her words, all she had. AA is not a closed society, or a “total institution” (cf. Rudy 1986). Anne lives in multiple systems of reference. Valorization of self-mastery creeps into AA. Anne said she felt pressure to look good. At one meeting, she mentioned that she felt “irritable, restless, and discontented.” A young woman with one year of sobriety expressed shock that someone with eighteen years of sobriety would feel that way and said, “No, you’re not!” She answered, “Yeah I am!” but the young woman replied, “It’s not like that.” Andrew’s question, “How long have you been sober?” and his response to her, “Nice try,”

were shocking. She felt offended, but this mood nevertheless prompted her to objectify her actions and look for non-sober qualities. She problematized her impulse to try harder by herself, and as Gabriel in chapter 2, came to see she could act otherwise. The alternative action was to distribute the agency in her actions by including God. She would act with God, not by herself, and not single-mindedly pursue her desires to be good at everything. Herself and God as co-agents will find other actions to pursue.

Alan explained that “when the plug’s in the jug,” or when people simply stop drinking, some chronic problems go away due to unclouded decision making. In such a situation, recovering alcoholics may “get drawn back to the bottle or the program. People might want to grab the wheel, get back in control.” One of his favorite slogans is “Thy will, not mine” because it is a quick way to remember that he does not have to control everything that enters his life. He said, “Not everything is for me to touch, taste, manipulate. Maybe it’s just for me to see. [Before] it seemed like things that came into my field of vision was *mine*. [Now] I can stay present and not engage, and I don’t have to have a tug of war with everything going past me.”

Here is an example of how Alan does not have a tug of war. One morning, Alan agreed to take a sponsee to a probation hearing. When the hearing was over, it was 9:50 and Alan had a doctor’s appointment at 10:10, and they were 15 to 30 minutes away. He kept telling himself, “If we’re late, we’re late, it’s not the end of the world.” However, he is really “OCD about time” (indeed, he was never late to any of our appointments) because part of his self-esteem is following through with what he says he will do. He reminded himself it was his idea to take his sponsee to the hearing, but he said, “My mind went round and round and all that noise in my head was getting loud, and for me, that’s how a headache becomes a brain tumor.” Like Maggie

listening to Monica, Alan was accustomed to self-monitoring his thoughts and feelings for vices.

He described the noise in his head as he waited in the waiting room for his sponsee:

My expectation was – and here’s the problem – I can take him to a 9:00 appt and be on time to my doctor’s appointment. Well, here I am sitting here in this chair, totally out of sight, out of mind. If he spazzed out and got arrested, I wouldn’t be the person they would call to tell. A lot of it is self-centered: this impacts *me*. What’s going to happen to *me* for being late to my appointment? So to quiet myself, “Nothing’s going to happen to *me* in a substantial way. I might have to reschedule.” But still, “What’s going on? What’s he doing? What should I do? Should I talk to the receptionist? Should I call my doctor’s office?” But all that “what if” and all that potential action, I’m just sitting in my chair and all this is in my head. To quiet myself, I just prayed. “Okay, God, what are we going to do?” “Nothing.” And the door opened, and it wouldn’t be him. It opened again, it wasn’t him, and then it was. And we made it with 30 seconds to spare.

As he prayed, he became a co-agent with God. As with Annie, he could act otherwise. He could choose among different actions. He did nothing. He used an AA slogan to sum up the situation: “I’m not driving the bus.” He said,

My Higher Power and I are maneuvering through the obstacles and stresses, and I have to stay mindful of what’s out of my control. Like a second grader, if it enters my field of vision, it’s *mine*. Mine to have, to eat, to screw, to fix if it’s broken. The truth is, it’s not mine. But sometimes it might be mine.

I asked him, “How do you know?” He answered, “I need a Higher Power to help me.” In other words, he must be a distributed agent.

While Alan sat quietly in the waiting room, he self-monitored. The situation was a minor one (“a headache”) that he was signifying as a major problem (“a brain tumor”). He attended to interoceptive sensations: his “mind going round and round” and hearing a loud noise in his head. These sensations indexed some kind of trouble. Initially, his physical condition generated a mood in which he interpreted the signs around him, such as the minutes going by on the clock and his friend not appearing through the door, as signs indicating an unpleasant consequence for him, being late to his appointment. Yet, given that one of Alan’s favorite slogans is “Pause when agitated,” rather than just take his mood as an unproblematic part of the situation, he took it as an object for examination. That slogan comes from the Big Book:

As we go through the day we pause, when agitated or in doubt, and ask for the right thought or action. We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day “Thy will be done.” We are then in much less danger of excitement, fear, anger, worry, self-pity, or foolish decisions. We become much more efficient. We do not tire so easily, for we are not burning up energy foolishly as we did when we were trying to arrange life to suit ourselves (AA 2001, 87-88).

“Pause when agitated” objectifies interceptive states into objects to be monitored. In a calmer mood, he interpreted his worries about his appointment as signifying the vice of self-centeredness. He engaged in dialogue with himself, telling himself that being late for an appointment was a minor problem and that he put himself in that situation, that it was not his sponsee’s fault or the court’s fault or anyone else’s fault. He then resorted to prayer, a dialogue in which the addressee was God. This is another case of stance-taking, if one does not assume he is talking to an entity. God may represent a nearly transcendental third-person stance (Keane 2016) on his situation. This stance is quite separate from Alan’s absorption in his current engagement with the signs around him. To Alan, he is talking to God. Another way to approach this activity is that prayer is a means by which to distance oneself as much as possible to view them from a God’s-eye perspective to see one’s own actions in a manner disinterested in the concerns of human activity in the moment. Having been sober for two decades, Alan has the experience of interpreting his physical states in multiple ways. Taking a third-person stance on himself pulls himself out of his absorption and calls up memories of those multiple interpretations. Again, a choice to do otherwise presents itself: do nothing.

### ***Extensional Mode of Moral Reasoning***

Step Four, which states “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,” is the primary means by which certain thoughts, feelings, and actions are objectified and become available as sign-vehicles signifying virtues or vices. In AA’s interpretation of alcoholism, drinking is an expression of more fundamental problems: “Our liquor was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and consequences” (AA 2001, 64). The chapter “How It Works” draws an analogy between an alcoholic rooting out those causes and consequences to a business taking inventory.<sup>32</sup> It is a “fact-finding and a fact-facing process” to “disclose damaged or unsalable goods, to get rid of them promptly and without regret.” Alcoholics do the same with

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<sup>32</sup> Bill Wilson worked at researching companies to provide information to stockbrokers (Kurtz 1979).

their lives, first “search[ing] out the flaws in our make-up which caused our failure” (2001, 64). This excerpt from the chapter is another example of the heteroglot nature of AA’s practices. Step Four combines a rational bureaucratic practice, inventory taking, with notions harkening back to original sin as in the phrase “flaws in our make-up which caused our failure.” Indeed, in Step Seven, alcoholics ask God to remove those defects; the alcoholic cannot deliver herself from sin. In addition, the 12 x 12 explicitly compares the flaws in make-up to the Seven Deadly Sins. The chapter goes on to explain

Being convinced that self, manifested in various ways was what had defeated us, we considered its common manifestations. Resentment is the “number one” offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically. In dealing with resentments, we set them on paper.

AA’s model of alcoholic subjectivity is a hybrid one. Alcoholism is an illness both mental and physical,<sup>33</sup> but there is also a more fundamental spiritual aspect consisting of the alcoholic’s “make-up” or “self.” The Big Book provides a template for the inventory with instructions on what to put in each column (AA 2001, 65):

I’m resentful at	The cause	Affects my
People, institutions, or principles	A description of the offending incident	self-esteem, pocketbook, ambitions, personal relationships, sexual relationships

There is no intensional definition of “resentment” in the Book. Instead, it supplies a range of examples, such as a someone who told the writer’s wife about a mistress, a woman who snubbed him, and an employer who accused him of padding his expense account. Given these examples, the reader may think of similar resentments to put in her own inventory. The 12 x 12 goes into further detail about the third column. It states, “Creation gave us instincts for a purpose. Without them we wouldn’t be complete human beings.” The basic desires are for sex relations, material and emotional security, and for companionship, and are necessary for human survival, flourishing, reproduction, and the existence of a society. “Yet these instincts, so necessary for

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<sup>33</sup> The Big Book does not use the term “disease.”

our existence, often far exceed their proper functions. Powerfully, blindly, many times subtly, they drive us, dominate us, and insist upon ruling our lives” (AA 2007, 42).

AA emphasizes responsibility. Rather than blame the people one resents, the inventory taker is to see the offending people as “sick.” Because they are sick, one does not retaliate or argue with them. Instead, one asks God to help one take a kindly and tolerant view of them (AA 2001, 66-7). There is a fourth column that invites the reader to consider how she played a role in creating the resentment. It consists of four vices:

Where was I selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, or frightened?

These actions become indexes of the vices selfishness, dishonesty, self-seeking, and fear. Intentional definitions are not offered for these vices, either; instead, the sponsor prompts the sponsee to produce examples.

AA’s model of alcoholic subjectivity contains implicit layers. The deepest layer is what is called the self or one’s make-up, and includes a set of primal human instincts. When the instincts in this innermost layer go awry, the condition is called a “spiritual malady.” The presence of a resentment is diagnostic of problems in this innermost layer. The spiritual malady is the root cause of mental and physical illnesses above this layer, including alcoholism. Above this layer are self-justifications, guilt and self-loathing, self-righteousness, and pride that prevent the alcoholic from seeing that “instinct run wild in themselves” caused their drinking (AA 2007, 44-7). AA’s model closely resembles the topographical model described by Carr (2011). Clinicians employed a tubular model in which layers of denial overlay a layer of anger which covered a layer of shame. These layers prevented addicts from recognizing their inner truths. Both the therapists’ and AA’s topographical models of addicted subjectivity may be seen as outgrowths of depth psychology and a Western tradition that conceptualizes personhood in terms of a deep, inner self. In the Fourth Step, with the help of a sponsor, alcoholics gather tokens of resentments, instincts, and vices. This begins the formation of the extrinsic mode of moral reasoning which they employ in future self-monitoring. They learn to interpret recurring behaviors as signifying

elements in the layers of their addicted subjectivity. Jennifer's Fourth Step provides an example of this process.

For fourteen years, Jennifer stayed sober without AA. Then, she discovered her husband was having affairs and that their friends knew and did not tell her. She decided to divorce him. This prompted her to try to understand her relationships with other people. She recalled AA as a place where one learns to live in a different way, and so decided to go through the Steps with a sponsor. It took her three or four years to go through all the Steps, but the results were "life saving." She described her initial experience as follows:

I met this woman, and she was fantastic. She was very insightful, very non-judgmental, and I thoroughly enjoyed her helping me inventory my stuff and giving me her feedback and cutting through my sick, delusional thinking. I was having epiphany after epiphany. "Oh my god, everything I knew is wrong!" It just turned everything around.

Her Fourth Step was an intersubjective process by which she and her sponsor brought her closer to truth. As described in the previous chapter, her grasp of the truth was intuitive: she had epiphanies. When we met, she had started drinking again in moderation, but continued to use her personal inventory. She said, "I got it electronically and cross-referenced so I can psychoanalyze myself." She continued Fourth Step work with friends she made in AA. Their conversations help her because, as she says, "I notice I'm thinking this way, and it stems back from how I was raised, or something that happened, a way that I coped with something in my past." The others then help her "sort through it and go forward thinking more clearly." Like Tom and others, Jennifer framed an addicted state in terms of ethics. Addiction is associated with delusion, with being wrong about how she apprehended herself, while sobriety is characterized by clear thinking about herself.

Jennifer was the only one of my informants who enjoyed the Fourth Step. Many others said they dreaded it or were highly skeptical. Jennifer used words like "realize" and "aha," and when she said the words "epiphany after epiphany," the lift of her eyebrows, wide eyes, and smile indicated pleasure. For Jennifer, human flourishing is about knowing who she is and what she values. This requires knowing the truth through clear thinking. "Sick," "delusional," or "wrong" thinking prevents her from knowing herself. The correspondence theory of truth underlies what she calls clear thinking. The pleasure she experienced came as a result of having

her thoughts come into a closer relation to reality, a reality she is able to see with the help of interlocutors.

While some people start listing resentments immediately, Jennifer could not think of any the first time her sponsor told her to write them down. She said, I have no resentments. Her sponsor did not explain what a resentment was, but instead asked, If you were to have a resentment, what do you think it would be? Jennifer answered, Being hit by my father. For column three, her sponsor helped her through the question, How did it affect your emotional security? Jennifer could not answer, so her sponsor gave examples. She said, If it was me, I would feel unworthy or unlovable or something like that. Referring back to the discussion of Silverstein's (2005) type-sourced and token-sourced sets of like things in the previous chapter, the sponsor provided a set of tokens of ways to feel emotionally insecure. Jennifer answered, I guess so. They determined that being hit by her father affected her ambitions because she was less likely to invite other children over. It stunted her socially by not allowing her to make the friendships other children made. She said, "The big thing for me was the fourth column, 'my part'. Where was I selfish, self-seeking, and all that. I got angry. I was a kid! I'm not to blame for my parents doing something like that!" Her sponsor told her that being selfish or self-seeking is not necessarily negative. Together they identified her desire to appear to be in a loving family as a form of self-seeking. She wanted other people to see her as normal, stable, and worthy of having loving parents. One of the column four items – "Where were we frightened?" – made sense to her, given her father's violence. The question "Where were we dishonest?" puzzled her because she did not see how that could have anything to do with her being hit.

Jennifer came to learn how recognize behaviors as types of dishonest behaviors while working with the same sponsor two years later. She resented her stepchildren's bad behavior and felt that her husband did not discipline them properly. When her husband's children were younger, they were in day care. His youngest son had behavioral issues, and she and her husband used to argue about who would pick them up because neither wanted to hear about what they had done. "You go get them. I did it last time and I got an earful about what he did." When they came to the fourth column, her sponsor asked her, Where did your ideas of parenting come from? Jennifer said that is when "it clicked," an intuitive grasping of truth. She answered, Maybe from a couple of parents who didn't do the best job? She said, "It was like it all came back to me: normalizing how my parents acted. I had this idea of how parents should be." Therapeutic

discourse provided a type, “normalization,” that she employed to place her attitudes about parenting within a set of dishonest behaviors. She went on to say, “ I had to realize that I didn’t have the best examples and maybe I don’t know and have no right to decide that it should be this way or that way.” For Jennifer, her sponsor’s question brought her closer to “reality” in that she now knew her underlying motive. These motives lay within the innermost layer of AA’s topographical model, the layer of truths about oneself. Within her account, her normalization have an implied indexical relationship to vices, perhaps lack of humility or Ego. Jennifer’s Fourth Step did not produce a rule. Her sponsor did not tell her never to give parental advice because she lacked the authority. The example was contextual. Giving parental advice was inappropriate in that situation because of her motive.

The Fourth Step entails truth-telling to oneself. Jennifer explained that the Fourth Step “came down to being in touch with what my motivations were,” which is what the Big Book recommends. It suggests prayer or meditation at the beginning of each day:

...we ask God to direct our thinking, especially asking that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives. Under these conditions, we can employ our mental faculties with assurance, for after all God gave us brains to use. Our thought-life will be placed on a much higher plane when our thinking is cleared of wrong motives (AA 2001, 86).

The “higher plane” refers to a “plane of inspiration” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001, 87). In this view, asking God to direct one’s thinking in this way frees it from the types of motives that would compromise the use of one’s mental faculties. Another way to put this might be that this puts one in a third-person stance on oneself. Jennifer checked her own thoughts with her sponsor and her friends, just as others might check with God. She said,

A lot of times we do have a selfish motivation. Sometimes when the children weren’t behaving, I thought it was a reflection on me. It doesn’t always have to be a bad thing to want to appear a certain way. But I think the harm in it was in not knowing what my motivations were.

Again, there is no rule to follow about how not to be selfish. Jennifer and her sponsor sifted through events in her life and found various examples of how selfishness manifests. When Jennifer self-examines in the future, she may compare her actions to these examples. If she finds similarities, she may then typify that action as selfish. However, even if they typify a behavior as

selfish, it may not necessarily be a vice. Context also determines whether something is a vice. It is not a problem to want other people to think well of her, but that time, it was a vice given her lack of knowledge of her motives. She told herself that she wanted what was in the children’s best interest, but in truth she did not want to be embarrassed by their bad behavior. She said, “My delusion was in convincing myself that I was coming from a place of wanting the best for them when I was thinking of myself. Understanding where I’m coming from helps me let go of the resentment.”

A more detailed example of the Fourth Step follows. Jennifer described another resentment, this of a man she dated four years prior to our conversation. After they had been dating three months, she assumed he would include her in his holiday plans because he knew she no longer had family after her parents and sister died. Her boyfriend’s ex-wife and daughter were visiting, and he said it was too soon for her to join his family. “I was incredibly resentful. Most people I talked to were like, You’ve only been dating three months.” Columns three and four were as follows:

Affects my	Where was I selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, or frightened?
Financial security: I don’t have a partner	Selfishness: I wanted to be part of a family. I wanted comfort and security
Emotional security: He was not proud of me, not excited about me or our relationship. I’m not worthy of being prioritized and introduced to his family	Self-seeking: I wanted to be seen as important and worth having around
Ambitions: I want to be part of a family, want to be accepted and loved by people	Frightened: No one knows about me, and I’m giving more than I’m getting in the relationship and making a fool out of myself for someone who doesn’t care about me
Personal relationships: Makes me think none of them want me around if they didn’t invite me	Dishonest: I was dishonest because I don’t get to decide for him when it’s the right time for me to be included on that level
Sex: I feel like I gave myself to someone who wasn’t serious about me	Where I was to blame: My timetable is important, too

Jennifer continued to employ therapeutic discourse as a source of types for grouping her behaviors within AA’s topographical model. When we discussed this inventory, she said, “Now I can see that it’s all stemmed from a fear of rejection and abandonment.” Feminism provided

another source for types of behaviors. Jennifer commented on her desire for a partner. “So I need a man for my other half. I wanted that family and financial security that comes with that.” About her dishonesty, she said, “If he didn’t accept me fast enough by my standards, I should have moved on. I was to blame by saying, ‘It’s not right for you not to include me,’ but I stayed when it was that important. Looking back, I needed to respect myself enough to say, This is what I want and I’m not getting it, and move on when I’m not, even if what I’m asking for is not the most ‘mature’ and ‘independent.’” Her tone of voice implied quotes around those words, uncoupling her needs from judgments of good or bad. Instead, it is inappropriate to look for these things in someone who cannot provide them. Maturity and independence are valued American virtues, but Jennifer does not treat them as categorical imperatives. She said, “Having worked through it, say I’m in the same situation again, meet a guy, dating for three months, I’d probably already have my own plans for the holidays.”

Jennifer said her sponsor gave her “a safe place” to express emotions. Her sponsor’s speech and behavior generated a mood conducive to truth-telling. Jennifer thoroughly enjoyed how her sponsor brought her closer to reality. Jennifer said, “I didn’t even know how to cry. Getting choked up and just fighting it. I can’t be seen like this! Let it out, you have to feel it. You have to. I’ll let some emotions fly around her, but then at home, that’s when it really just lets loose.” This is an aspect of truth-telling Foucault did not expand upon – the frank expression of emotions. The danger of expressing emotions with negative cultural valuation like shame, fear, and sadness that accompany frank speech make it that much more difficult, but the warmth between the two women enabled it. “Reality” in Jennifer’s case is predicated upon AA’s topographical model in which there is a true motive for a person’s actions hidden under layers of justifications that preserve a false sense of self. This reality is co-constructed; it takes the both of them to discern true motives. My informants’ recognition of reality as reality is determined by an affective response, a sense of the sponsor’s interpretation “resonating” with them.

When Jennifer shared her inventory with her sponsor, she was performing Step Five: “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” The Big Book explains the practice as follows:

In actual practice, we usually find a solitary self-appraisal insufficient...If we skip this vital step, we may not overcome drinking. Time after time newcomers have tried to keep to themselves certain facts about their lives. Trying to avoid this humbling experience,

they have turned to easier methods. Almost invariably they got drunk...they never completed their housecleaning. They took inventory all right, but hung on to some of the worst items in stock. They only *thought* they had lost their egoism and fear; they only *thought* they had humbled themselves. But they had not learned enough of humility, fearlessness and honesty, in the sense we find it necessary, until they told someone else *all* their life story.

More than most people, the alcoholic leads a double life. He is very much the actor. To the outer world he presents his stage character. This is the one he likes his fellows to see. He wants to enjoy a certain reputation, but knows in his heart he doesn't deserve it (AA 2001:73; emphasis original)

By performing Step Five, people acquire further examples of what honesty is. Within the notion of rigorous honesty in the second paragraph lurks the Western notion that one's outer self must match one's inner self to achieve an ideal of authenticity, and the American notion that one must be the same person across contexts. Confessing in this way performs the semiotic work of collapsing the separation of an inner and outer "self."

They also form relations of likeness between behaviors and the virtue of humility. In meetings, people sometimes discuss the difference between humility and humiliation, of being humbled versus being humiliated and provide examples from their experience. Performing Step Five is one of them. Although Step Five involves the disclosure of potentially stigmatizing experiences, the point is not to the shame the sponsee. Although one is free to share the Fourth Step with any trusted person, such as a clergyman or therapist, according to Alan, there is a benefit to sharing one's Fourth Step with someone who has also done the Fourth Step. Because sponsors usually share much of their experiences with their sponsees, the confession is not one-way. Alan said,

They can share what it was like for them and take away the sting of having your hand in the cookie jar. It's not so painful to have someone recognize your naughty motives. It can be part of a shared human experience.

Thus, in addition to establishing relations of likeness, Step Five establishes a mood that facilitates the labor of habit reformation. Alan explained that it was not what his sponsor and friend Doug said, what mattered was that Doug relieved the shame Alan felt about things he did by staying with him. Alan told Doug all the things he did that he was ashamed of despite his fear that such revelations would alienate others. Yet Doug still consistently showed up to help him and care for him. "Doug loved me unconditionally. I couldn't shock him if I wanted to. He not

only gave me that assurance and confidence, he also gave me the hope that no matter what I encountered, it would be okay.”

Most non-AA members are familiar with the notion of amends from depictions of AA in popular culture. Step Eight states, “Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all,” while Step Nine states, “Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.” The purpose of those Steps are to “sweep away the debris which has accumulated out of our effort to live on self-will and run the show ourselves” and “to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001:76-78). Experienced sponsors emphasize that Step Eight is only a list. Many people are not eager to approach people they have wronged, and in some cases, to admit any wrongdoing. Alan recommended talking with a sponsor before actually making amends. He said that just because a person is on your Eighth Step list, it does not mean it is a good idea to approach the person. First, he wants to know the sponsee’s motivation for making the amends.

He shared an example of why consultation with a sponsor is helpful. One of his sponsees, Claudia, brought him a letter she wrote her nephew. She wrote, “I know I was inappropriate, but I had relapsed on pain pills from the doctor’s office and was out of my mind.” As with the example of Tyler’s text, Alan engaged in a type-sourced interdiscursive process. Claudia presented the sentence she wrote as an amends, but he recognized it as a token of a discursive type inappropriate in this context. He said, “Basically, she was asking for forgiveness.” He explained to her the type of utterance that is appropriate for Step Nine: “What we’re doing is identifying our part and then making a commitment to change. What injury do you think you caused?” Claudia explained that she had an argument with her sister, her nephew’s mother, and the nephew knew there was an argument. Claudia believed she put him in the middle and that was inappropriate. Alan said, “I said, ‘I got that,’ and then I said, ‘In your letter it looks like you’re asking for forgiveness. How do you set right what it was you set wrong? How about in the future, you not put this child in the middle of your relationship problems with the rest of your family?’ She said, ‘Aha! Awesome.’” Alan said her letter cast her as the victim and put an emotional burden on her nephew to understand that she was an addict and did not mean to hurt him and to forgive her for her addiction. It is not self-evident how to acknowledge responsibility or set things right. Alan did not give Claudia step by step instructions on how to make amends,

but provided an example. Alan explained that “What I lost nine times out of ten is credibility and integrity. I was responsible for the emotional eggs of the people around me, and I dropped them in favor of my alcoholism and my addiction.” To rebuild credibility, Claudia needed to identify the damage she caused so she could go in the proper direction toward repair. Alan described the spirit of her amends as follows:

Okay, I’m erratic. There are going to be times when it’s better for you not to put your eggs in my basket. But to be okay with that and say, “Look, I recognize I’m flawed.” One of the things that’s missing from this lady’s repertoire is a sense of humor that goes with “I’m fallible.”

Claudia may not be able to apply this formulation to all of her relationships in all situations, hence Alan’s advice to consult with a sponsor whenever doing a Ninth Step. A person who has witnessed or experienced many Ninth Steps can help decide what is appropriate in each context. Alan also had a piece of advice related to mood: keep a sense of humor. A dour, serious mood makes the labor of habit reformation more laborious.

### ***Practical Mastery***

My informants strived for *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, in exercising virtue. When they went through the Twelve Steps, they learned a mode of moral reasoning in which they learned the virtues and vices through analogy. *Phronesis* in their case consisted of self-mastery carried out within relations of dependence on others. There is always an other in the ethical practices I describe. The first two cases feature people relatively new to recovery. Maggie and Gabriel learn to thematize ethical action, like a person learning a complex skill such as playing an instrument will learn by having that skill broken down into components that are practiced separately. The last case is Chris, who serves as an example of *phronesis* as a process of constant refinement. *Phronesis* involves self-monitoring for problematic interoceptive states, and using them as cues for self-reflection. They learn to create indexical linkages of causation between the problem state and antecedent events. They learn to identify what would have been their actions stemming from those states, and categorize them as a vice, and instead, they carry out virtuous actions. To do this, they need to know what actions are possible, and what their ethical descriptions are. Management of mood is also vital; they learn what a virtuous management of emotional life is like.

## *Maggie*

Maggie learned how to fight with Jamie, her “first sober relationship.” She had followed the conventional recovery wisdom to avoid romantic relationships for a year after getting sober. In later reflection upon these fights, she said, “I realized feelings existed. I didn’t have the thoughts yet on where they came from, or why, or even the words to express them fully.” Over the course of her sobriety, she learned to make bodily sensations into sign vehicles, and give them labels of “feelings.”

This example contains fights over a period of about six months. The fights were a proving ground for new forms of objectification and equivalence-making. Their first fight occurred while they were cooking at Jamie’s house. She was boiling water for rice, made a joking remark, and Jamie said he was not impressed. She did not expect this response. As part of learning to manage mood, in the moment she recognized her mood as resentment, she left the kitchen before she could say something she would regret. She said, “I’m [leaving the kitchen and sitting alone] because I know this is what I need to do. Leave him alone, because I’m going to say something stupid. At that point, I was like, You all [the “voices” in her head] need to talk amongst yourselves until I’m ready to say something.” She wrote this in her journal after she left the kitchen:

1. So what happened? I was giddy. I was acting silly. I said when I started the rice, I’m boiling the water! He responded, I’m not impressed. It was like a punch in the face. And my elevated mood dropped. I asked, What doesn’t impress you? He replied, Boiling water certainly doesn’t. I shut down. I walked into the other room to look at Instagram photos. It certainly threw me off. I thought it would be silly and funny and fun and make him laugh.
2. Who did he think he was? (ego voice)
3. Was I being stupid? (insecure voice)
4. What the fuck happened? (happy-go-lucky voice).
5. Then anger, resentment.
6. Why? Why was he a dick just then? Did you know I was really happy to be there?
7. Why the fuck was he being such a dick? (ego voice)
8. So I felt like he was being serious (my perspective)
9. I felt like I got punched in the face. Out of nowhere.
10. Voices voices.
11. Why you have to be like that? Hurt (child voice).
12. Pride was also hurt because he called me stupid. I thought I could let my quote unquote guard down. Insecure because I’d love him to like me.

Maggie focuses attention on her thoughts, feelings, needs, and impulses. These become signs. She termed them “voices.” Chris did this as well. He listed several voices: hungry, angry, rebel, addict, martyr, and child. His addict, who he describes as “the little justifier fucker,” says, “You can do that. That’s okay. Go ahead. It’s not going to hurt you.” The rebel just says, “No. No. No.” With both Chris and Maggie, there are several layers of objectification. As with most AA members, they monitor their reactions to situations and pause when agitated. They both then turn their agitation to objects for signification. I cannot say exactly what happened in their heads, but they both “heard” their agitation as voices. Chris and Maggie’s voices are idiosyncratic ways to pause when agitated; this technique is not taught in AA. A somewhat similar practice that I heard described at several meetings, was sponsors’ advice to sponsees to watch their thoughts and feelings as if they are appearing on a movie screen, a visual rather than auditory technique.

She prompts her internal examination with the question, So what happened? She replies to herself with a description of the fight from one stance, the stance that Jamie’s reply was a punch in the face. Replies seeking clarification of what happened arise in lines 2, 3, and 4. She labels them voices. In line 5, from being “shut down,” these thoughts generate a mood of anger. In lines 6 and 7, her mood generates a signification of Jamie as a “dick.” In line 8, she steps back from her absorption in the fight to observe that she was interpreting Jamie’s comment as serious. She put this thought in a different category than the “voices.” She calls it “my” perspective, possibly the owner of the voices. In the next line, she reiterates feeling punched. In line 10, she reiterates the presence of voices, and another voice appears in the next line. In line 12, she stops “voicing” her thoughts and makes the statements that her pride was hurt and she is insecure.

As we looked at her notebook, Maggie showed an interest in the questions she wrote. “‘Who did he think he was?’ ‘Was I being stupid?’ What the fuck happened?’ Then I got pissed. I felt like I got punched in the face. I didn’t think he would do that.” She continued, “‘Why is he such a dick.’ That’s a teenager, don’t you think?” She reflected on her writing for a moment. “‘Who did he think he was?’ was my first reaction. Then, ‘Was I being stupid?’ The child voice was like, ‘Did I do something wrong?’ And the teenager was like, ‘No no no no no. Don’t worry about that. Why is *he* being a dick?’”

After looking at Instagram and going through this exercise, she was able to speak to him about what happened:

I didn't say exactly what I wanted to say, but I did the best I could. And I'm very happy about it. I said I felt like I was being childlike and silly and goofy, and he was trying to knock that down. And he was like, Oh my gosh, I was totally kidding. He said to me, You don't know if I'm the nice guy yet or not. I thought that was a very mature thing to say. Because he's right, I don't. And I went onto say that I'm so used to assholes, that yeah, and I know you're not every guy I ever dated in the past, but that stuff is going to come up.

However, afterwards she noticed an internal state that indicated that their fight was not yet over: she started to crave cookies. She had been avoiding sugar and gluten for about four weeks. She started Overeater's Anonymous in addition to AA the month of the fight. Attending OA brought certain bodily sensations into the set of objects available to her for signification: "The other night, I felt really felt like eating, but I was trying to figure out what the feeling really was. Was it in my stomach? And I realized I had a funny feeling in my mouth. I was thirsty! So I drank some water and didn't feel like eating anymore." She was interested in understanding the root of her sugar cravings. In a recovery framing, she was trying to meet needs inappropriately through an addictive substance. Later on the night of the rice fight, she wrote more about her craving. Her journal entry began,

So I crave sugar and I did eat 2 4 french fries tonight during dinner.

I said, "So the crossing out, you're being honest?" Maggie said, "Right, being honest." The crossing out was an index of her thoughts and actions. She admitted in her journal she ate french fries, a forbidden food according to her OA eating plan. She first lied and wrote the numeral 2, but thought better of this and crossed it out, and wrote the correct number. Her journal entry continued:

Mind, you want to be heard. Mind, how easy it is to think about mental survival, comfort zones, comfort food, comfort drugs, being warm, being touched, being paid attention to. How does the fight feel now? I feel a little bit like I want him to take care of me. The cooking showed that he might really not be able to. I want to be sexy and secure around him, and I want to take care of myself in some ways, but nurturing and kindness are really important to me right now.

Because she was not sure what her unmet needs were, she addressed herself in the second person in the first three statements. In the third, she asked herself a question, and then got a reply. She explained the remainder of the entry. She said, "My brain wanted to be soothed somehow. But

my body was actually full of food. When I checked in, it told me so. My brain was like, You're right. You're full. You don't need food. It knows I'm working on getting it what I need instead of killing my body." Like many addicts in recovery, she granted a separate agency to her body parts, or parts of herself, in this case her brain. She addressed her brain as an entity, and listened for its response.

I asked, "So comfort, being touched and taken care of are the needs? So when there was a threat you wouldn't get those needs met by him, the food craving kicked in?" Maggie answered yes, but she elaborated more on the complexity of her cravings. The sugar cravings tended to happen around the same time, "bar time," 10:00 or 11:00 at night. Rather than going to bars, she has nothing to do. She said, "I'm going to go home and what? Look at the Internet for an hour before I go to bed? It's like this gray zone. Thoughts creep in." I asked whether she thought craving sugar was a habit at that time of day, since she was usually at bars then. She said yes, and that is why she decided to write about it at that time. She talked to a friend, who said, "Just don't do it." Sounding like Gabriel in chapter 2, Maggie said, "I was like, You're right. That's an option I have. I don't have to pick it up. That is something I actually have physical control over. One of the things, one of the few." She said back in the "old days," she wouldn't have even gotten as far as talking to a friend about engaging in an addiction-related behavior. She would simply have been eating.

She said, "I thought it was really interesting: 'Mind, you want to be heard.' Are you saying, Nobody told me what it wanted and needed? 'How easy it is to think about mental survival.' It's interesting that that's where I took it, and went immediately to comfort zones. How that's how my brain can survive when I'm idle. Alone." We had a conversation months ago in which she identified fear of being alone as a trigger for addiction behaviors. Fears are among the problematic behaviors that alcoholics identify in their Fourth Step, and alcoholics learn to interpret those behaviors as indexical of fear. I mentioned that AA doctrine stipulates that fear is something she cannot control or fix. She said,

I know. I've finally got to the point that I was like, What is this? I can enjoy myself in my alone time. And that's why I started writing. I also thought it was interesting where I was like, he may not be able to take care of me. And I said I want to be sexy and secure around him, and take care of myself in some ways. And that's exactly what that means. If I'm going to be sexy and secure, I'm going to be the one who needs to do that. I provide

that for myself. I provide for myself the security I need and then [being sexy and secure] ends up manifesting itself.”

In other words, the need for security, which underlies the fear of being alone, is most reliably met through herself, rather than seeking it from her boyfriend. This is an example of the proper formulation of agency. Maggie cannot control Jamie and his actions, but she can control actions she takes, such as journaling, to further her recovery.

### *Gabriel*

Gabriel had an ongoing antagonism against Boyd, his ex-wife’s boyfriend. The first incident he related was when he met Kerrie at a gas station to drop off his daughter (he and Kerrie had joint custody). Gabriel said he felt “intense feelings of hate and anger” whenever he saw Boyd. He provided two details initially describing Boyd to me: he drove a “douchebag car,” a late model Camaro (which happened to be Gabriel’s dream car as a teenager), and his son raised pit bulls. In his mood, these characteristics indicated that Boyd was a “trashy” type of person, to use Gabriel’s term. Gabriel was at once troubled by his hatred and wanting to continue hating Boyd. Some of his anger was arguably justified. Kerrie had cheated on him with Boyd while they were married. During a phone conversation after the custody exchange, Kerrie later described to Gabriel how he was behaving toward Boyd. She described him as “staring him down from a distance.” Gabriel did not deny this, and said to me that he “issued an implicit verbal challenge in response to the greeting.” He then argued with Kerrie, warning her about Boyd’s past divorces (he had four). Gabriel said he used to get into arguments with Kerrie without thinking about or observing what he is doing, that he is being “judgmental” and “mean.” But at the time of our conversation, he had taken some steps toward gaining practical mastery of enacting virtue. He said, “I can actually see myself having an out of body experience when I’m starting to get into that mode. I see myself saying it and I try to stop myself. But my ghost hand just won’t cover my mouth.” He learned to monitor himself for the states of hate, anger, judgment, and meanness. He was able step back from his actions, like Maggie’s camera, and observe himself and typify his actions as vices. However, he was not yet able to formulate alternate virtuous actions and act otherwise.

About a month after that incident, he ran into Boyd at a local bank. They all lived in a small town about a 45 minute drive from Austin, so accidental meetings were not uncommon.

Boyd greeted him, but Gabriel ignored it and kept walking. He was embarrassed by this because everyone at the bank knows his family's business. In other words, he could see himself through the eyes of the bank employees, who saw a man behaving rudely toward his ex-wife's boyfriend. He was further embarrassed when he ran into Kerrie at a grocery store and ignored her as well. Here is a midpoint in changing habitual behavior. He observes himself doing things he does not want to do, but cannot yet consistently do something different. This time, he came up with an alternative action. In chapter 2, I described his resignification of his addicted state as "avoiding dealing with things," and sobriety as dealing with things. In this case, he decided to stop avoiding Kerrie. He eventually spoke to her about his behavior. During that conversation, Kerrie told him that she had spoken to a bank teller who was a friend of hers about the incident in the bank. Her friend commiserated with her by sharing stories about problems she had with her ex. That was the first time he had heard Kerrie refer to him as "her ex." He was taken aback because whenever he hears people talk about their ex, it is something like, "Ugh, the ex." He never imagined their relationship becoming that way. When Kerrie related the conversation to him, he saw that others could typify him as the psycho Ex. He said he could handle being jealous, but not that. He now had two descriptions of himself in behaving as he did: 1) a jealous person and 2) The Psycho Ex. Thus, a path was cleared to act differently. He made a decision to stop giving Kerrie a hard time over Boyd and to greet him. He partly enjoyed hating Boyd, but he also said hating does not feel good because it is not indicative of personal growth, something he strove to achieve. In contrast, not giving Kerrie a hard time and greeting Boyd verbally index personal growth.

### *Chris*

Chris related an incident that illustrates the relatively smooth way in which he enacts virtue, in comparison with Maggie and Gabriel. A friend invited him to listen to live music at 7:50. Chris, being former military, arrived twenty minutes early. His friend arrived half an hour late with other people. Chris thought that it would be just him and his friend. Furthermore, as soon as the group arrived, they decided to go across the street to a restaurant with outdoor seating so they could eat and listen to the music from that location. Chris had already eaten because his friend did not say anything about eating. He said, "I sat there and started to feel bad. Started to feel alone, abandoned, less than, all that shit. And then again it occurred to me I didn't do

nothing. I ain't done shit. Why should I feel bad?" I had earlier asked Chris what he does in problem situations. He said when he needs guidance, he slows down. He pauses when agitated and prays for guidance. I asked him how he prays. He said, "Help me. Show me. I need help. I don't know what to do here. I would like this, if this is your will. I used to say the St. Francis prayer,<sup>34</sup> but it drove me crazy." In the bar, he prayed. He said, "The thought I got was, We just have different ideas of friendship." This was the voice he heard that told him to choose his first gay sponsor. He calls it "the voice that always guides me well." I asked him how does he know it is that particular voice speaking. He said, "I just know. It's not necessarily a voice. It's a thought. You know how you get thoughts from different places in your head? I call it a voice, or different places, but essentially it's coded in some way that I know it's from a certain place." When I pressed him, he said, "It's a feeling. It's more like a sense. I can't break it down any better because I don't know. It's very directed."

So, in the bar, he came to the conclusion that that was not what he wanted in a friendship, and then left. His friend called him, but he did not want to talk. When he got home, he texted his friend. He said, "I don't accept this in friends. I deserve better than that, and I won't settle for anything less." The two have not been in much contact since. Chris greets his former friend when he sees him, but the friend tries to avoid him. Chris said this was not a matter of either person being right, but not accepting behaviors that are not acceptable to him. He said, "The biggest thing I learned is to opt out with no anger. Acceptance. When all that went through my head, I was angry, but then I wasn't. I was just like, I don't want to do this. It's not what I want. It's still

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<sup>34</sup> This is a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Like the Third Step Prayer, Chris felt it was too difficult to live up to.

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace!  
That where there is hatred, I may bring love.  
That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness.  
That where there is discord, I may bring harmony.  
That where there is error, I may bring truth.  
That where there is doubt, I may bring faith.  
That where there is despair, I may bring hope.  
That where there are shadows, I may bring light.  
That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.  
Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort, than to be comforted.  
To understand, than to be understood.  
To love, than to be loved.  
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.  
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.  
It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.

not what I want.” Chris also gave this as an example of reconfiguring responsibility, of knowing “When it’s not my shit, when it’s your shit.”

All this happened fairly rapidly. Feeling bad is a cue to slow down and step back from one’s experience. He typified the bad feelings as being alone, abandonment, etc. The issue of responsibility for the feelings arises, but he immediately concludes he did nothing wrong. He stepped back further and prayed, addressing his Higher Power and asking for help. His “little voice” provided an answer that blamed neither him nor his friend: they simply have different ideas about what a friend is and does. As with Annie and Alan in previous examples, the utility of prayer may be providing a transcendent third-person perspective from which to observe oneself and bring in different systems of reference for behaviors. Being a long-time AA member, Chris has learned that anger is not the proper mood from which to act. Nor does Chris try to control his mood. Instead, he relinquishes self-control and becomes a co-agent by addressing his Higher Power. He experiences a change in mood, which affects his characterization of the situation. The virtuous choice of opting out, rather than doing something such as stewing at the bar fueling his resentment, presented itself and he acted upon it. This is an example of a person demonstrating *phronesis* in living “a spiritual life.”

### ***Mood, Agency, and Extrinsic Modes of Reasoning***

At the beginning of the chapter, Adam, Tom, and Garrett articulated the primary concern of the alcoholics I encountered: how to build a new life without alcohol. Building a new life entails conducting oneself in the proper virtuous ways in everyday contexts. Garrett thoroughly listed places in which one must live a spiritual life: home, work, families, church, and quotidian dealings with other people like shopping and getting gas. Other ethnographic examples – Alan in the waiting room late for his appointment, Jennifer’s encounter with parenting, Claudia apologizing to her nephew, and Maggie, Gabriel, and Chris negotiating conflicts with other people – demonstrate the range of everyday actions that form the building blocks of a new life based upon a novel set of ethics.

In order to enact novel behaviors, my informants had to be inclined toward doing them, and had to interpret them as do-able. Mood enables this to happen. Vincent’s example of the magical meeting demonstrates how mood is both generated and generative. Vincent’s job brings him into contact with desperate people in nearly hopeless circumstances, and he had been doing

unpleasant things like paying \$200 in parking tickets. His resultant mood was anger and hopelessness. As he rushed about Austin in this mood, he grouped each person he encountered, in his memory and in his environment, into the same type of “fucked up” person despite the fact that these people exhibit all manner of qualia. Yet the material practices of the meeting he attended generated a different mood. He had to sit still, keep silent, breathe, and listen to people sharing hopeful things. These practices induced physical changes in his body, relaxing him and easing his stress. His mood thus shifted and he could apprehend a greater range of qualia of other people. His mood was generative of different interpretations, of the people as a different type, as hopeful people who have improved their lives and achieved worthwhile-ness as opposed to worthlessness. Discursive events of a type deemed inappropriate to a recovery setting, such as “drunkalogues,” boasting, whining, “therapy speak,” and rambling from topic to topic, may generate moods of irritation and boredom in the listeners. Yet they may prompt a chain of semiosis in which the listeners reflect upon whether their efforts to become practical masters of virtue are adequate. These efforts include developing an ability to recognize problematic moods and their effect on interpretation, as in Maggie’s case when she identified her irritation at Monica’s rambling.

This chapter went on to examine two practices essential to living a spiritual life as my informants experienced it: distribution of agency and acquiring an extrinsic mode of moral reasoning. Acting with co-agents, whether they are God, some other Higher Power, or trusted friends in the fellowship, enables for complex stance-taking on oneself. Adam addressed himself as a father talking to his children or a therapist healing a traumatized client. When Alan and Chris prayed, they could take a distanced third-person stance on how they were behaving in particular situations, which enabled them to act differently in those contexts.

To undergo a moral transformation, my term for “living a spiritual life,” my informants internalized AA’s implicit topographical model of addicted subjectivity and learned to typify their thoughts, feelings, and actions as virtuous or vicious elements within that model. AA’s model posited relationships between phenomena in different layers. The innermost layer consisted of basic human instincts, true motives and intents, and a general conceptualization of a person’s “make-up.” Instincts gone awry and flaws in make-up result in a “spiritual malady” that in turn generates other illnesses such as alcoholism. Alcoholics may have tendencies toward ego or self-loathing that prevents them from seeing the truth of the innermost layer. Practices such as

the Step Four inventory objectifies particular thoughts, feelings, and actions and sorts them into these layers. My informants learned what type their thoughts, feelings, and actions are by extensional modes of argument. Their sponsors gave examples and analogies rather than rules or maxims, and taught them to consider context. Chapter 3 examined how sponsees choose their sponsors. If their sponsor is a partial replica of themselves, the likelihood of rapport is greater. Rapport helps establish a mood that enables the truth-telling necessary for the semiotic operations in Steps Four and Five to take place. Moods of warmth, as between Doug and Alan, and humor, as between Maggie and Sarah in chapter 3, encourage the sponsee to take on the sponsor's interpretations.

Finally, the chapter closed with two ethnographic cases in which people were in the midst of acquiring *phronesis*, and one case of *phronesis*. These three cases provide detailed descriptions of specific ways that my informants came to enact virtues in order to live life on a different ethical basis. All three involved conflicts with other people. At the beginning of each incident, each person recognized an interoceptive state that indexed a problem relevant to living a sober life. They were aware of their multiple stance-taking on the conflict. Gabriel both enjoyed feeling hatred toward Boyd yet at the same time was troubled by it. Maggie and Chris objectified their stances in terms of "voices" that they heard expressing a range of possible modes of relating to other people. Maggie discerned an ego-driven stance that absolved her of blame and labeled Jamie "a dick," an insecure stance that hoped for his approval, a happy-go-lucky stance that was amused and perplexed by the situation, a childlike stance that did not understand the hurt Jamie inflicted on her, and a distanced perspective that could evaluate the other stances. Chris jumped from stance to stance, viewing himself as "alone," "abandoned," "less than," and then abruptly shifted to questioning these stances. He had no reason to feel bad. Then he heard voice he designated as originating from a particular place within him that guides him well.

Maggie and Chris engaged in actions to uncover truths about the conflicts, in accordance with the topography of addiction. After she and Jamie discussed the fight and came to a mutual understanding of it, Maggie experienced sugar cravings, which she interpreted as an index of unmet needs for emotional security and sexual relationships. Properly addressing resentments toward her boyfriend and cravings, elements of outer layers, requires understanding the truth of her innermost needs and meeting those needs. Similarly, Chris identified a need within the

innermost layer—the instinct for companionship, for social relations. Feeling alone and abandoned initially blocked him from seeing this truth. What really mattered in the bar situation, then, was ensuring that his need for friendship be met by the right person, not this particular friend. Engaging in these typifications, and drawing semiotic relations of causation, were techniques for Maggie and Chris to perform ethical operations on themselves to become virtuous people. Gabriel, as previously mentioned, did not internalize many of AA's concepts. In the Boyd situation, he returned to the dilemma he identified as central to sober versus alcoholic living: avoiding things or dealing with them. When his ex-wife reported the conversation about his ignoring Boyd at the bank, he was surprised that he could be typified by others as a Psycho Ex. When he saw himself as evaluated by other people, his choice of dealing or avoiding was imbued with the additional ethical matter of the kind of person he would like to be: The Ex or a person embarking on personal growth.

## CHAPTER VI

### **“Making Small”: Materiality and Experiential Contouring**

Early in fieldwork, while talking with people about the Steps, I heard amused or irritated side commentary about them. A man said that although he habitually lies, he cannot lie about past events in his Fourth Step because he has to write them down “in black and white.” A young woman resented her sponsor for insisting that she write her Fourth Step by hand rather than type it. At first, she could not think of resentments to put in her inventory, but as she began writing, she said the pen “took on a life of its own” and she wrote of past wrongs for hours. She said the words poured out of her in a flood of anger. One meeting participant remarked that “I didn’t want to do a Fourth Step because if I wrote it down, I couldn’t take it back.” I was struck by the effects of seemingly incidental material aspects of the Steps.

I remembered the “I can’t take it back” comment when I wrote my own Fourth Step inventory as a participant observer. I found it difficult to name people I resented. I could write, for instance, “my oldest sister” but it was unsettling to write her name. It seemed to be an incontrovertible accusation of her and myself as well. Relatively minor resentments diminished into pettiness on paper, while more serious matters gave me greater pause: someone could see these things. I had drawn a version of the Big Book’s inventory template onto graph paper, and there was a limited space into which I could write only one version of events. Objectifying what had previously existed as nagging thoughts and memories into the inventory format did not facilitate a third-person stance on my problems that evaluated them using AA’s standards. I simply felt uncomfortable. The written names and events became things that I indeed could not take back. I only reluctantly held onto the inventory as fieldnotes; I wanted to get rid of this “evidence.” After this experience, I listened for more remarks about the material aspects of recovery practices.

I was most fascinated by how people contoured the scale of mental experiences. In particular, they engaged in what I will call “making small.” I will give two quick illustrations.

Tom, a Christian white man in his fifties with a drawling accent, described the importance of the AA fellowship:

It happened thousands of times, my problems seem to be as big as an automobile. I attend a meeting, and after the meeting my problems have not changed one iota. It's identical, nothing has actually changed, but my problem seems to be the size of a baseball. Now I can handle it, take responsibility for the problem because I've been in an environment where people are sharing challenges and talking realistically about them, and where there's a ray of hope, a spirit of we can survive and we can take responsibility for the things that we can change. It helps to address these things honestly, and not alone. That is huge. I feel less alienated in this world. I feel a sense of brotherhood, of fellowship. I don't hate being alive. I don't have that feeling of worthlessness, of uselessness.

Tom begins with what I will call a "bigness" of scale. A problem the size of an automobile has the "big" quality of unmanageability. A problem the size of a baseball can fit in one's hand, and one can manipulate this small object. This "smallness" is manageability. Unmanageability is accompanied by feelings of alienation, worthlessness, uselessness, and hating to be alive. These feelings contain a description of himself as a type of agent. "Alienated" suggests that he feels different from others. He is useless and worthless; he lacks whatever it takes to tackle the automobile-sized problem, and can do nothing about it. According to his later remarks, he had been addressing his problem alone.

Then he did what AA members call "getting out of your head." Rather than thinking about the problem by himself, he entered into face-to-face interactions with other recovering alcoholics who were "sharing challenges." He shifted his terminology from "problem" to "challenge." The Oxford English Dictionary defines challenge as "A difficult or demanding task, esp. one seen as a test of one's ability or character." The people in the meeting talked about applying their abilities to difficult tasks. They did not comment upon the bigness of their problems. They talked about them "realistically," which involved addressing "things that we can change." That phrase is part of the serenity prayer which states, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." This prayer is one of the most common themes in meetings. The prayer breaks down problems into parts: "things we cannot change" and "things we can change." Tom's problem was undifferentiated in addition to being automobile-sized. A diffuse object broken down into categorizable parts becomes manageable.

There was a “ray of hope” in the meeting. The normative format of shares – “experience, strength, and hope” – explicitly asks the speaker to incorporate the quality of hope. In post-meeting conversation, people sometimes criticized shares that they judged to be mere complaining with the phrase, “Where’s the solution?” A hopeful share has a solution consisting of specifics about how the speaker dealt with things they can change in their day to day problems, and how they avoided trying to control or manage things they cannot change. Their ability to do so is taken as an index of strength. The hope comes from a depiction of themselves not as worthless or useless, but as strong people with serenity, courage, and wisdom. Hope is also generated by repeated concrete examples of people actually making changes.

Tom shifts from a mood of alienation to one of being part of a brotherhood or fellowship. This may be ascribed to typification. The people at the meeting are tokens of an ideal AA type. An ideal AA member is not perfect, but has many qualities in addition to striving for serenity, courage, and wisdom. AA members stress that the program is about taking action. They also extol the virtue of responsibility, such as in Step Nine, in which they make amends for wrongs committed to others. In this situation, the presence of things one can change affords the opportunity to take responsibility for them. Tom firmly believed that he was an addict, and so the fact that he and the others are tokens of an addict type goes without saying for him. Yet, as the meeting participants talked about their challenges, Tom picked up other qualities that they exhibited. They could be described as “responsible challenge-takers” in addition to being addicts. According to the logic of 12-Step programs, addicts are similar in essence. Yet when they work their program, they all take on other qualities. Through a kind of transitive relation, if Tom = the other addicts, and the other addicts = responsible challenge-takers when they are working their program, then does not Tom = responsible challenge taker? Being a responsible challenge-taker engenders a hopeful mood. By presenting themselves as virtuous, active agents, and by talking about things in the world that can be changed or have been changed through action, the speakers intersubjectively generated an infectious mood of hope. The mood can linger past its generation (Daniel 1996, Throop 2014). In that mood, Tom no longer hates being alive and left the meeting with a baseball-sized problem that he can manage. Indeed, he expressed that mood during our conversation together.

The second example involves the slogan “One day at a time.” It addresses a nearly ubiquitous problem among recovering alcoholics: the long temporal span of not drinking. They

are meant to abstain for the rest of their lives. The Big Book describes the mood that precedes a desire to drink as “restless, irritable, and discontented” (AA 2001, xxvii). Recovering alcoholics often say, “Am I going to feel this way forever?” when they feel discomfort when abstaining. No one I spoke to relished the prospect of not drinking for the rest of their lives. For them, alcohol engendered “ease and comfort” (AA 2001, xxix). A lifetime seemed an impossibly long time to forgo ease and comfort, but they thought it was necessary. Most were on board with NIDA’s formulation of addiction as a “chronic, relapsing brain disease.” In AA parlance, alcoholism is “a progressive fatal illness.” Alcoholism progresses even while they are sober. This is expressed in the cliché “As I sit in this meeting, my disease is out in the parking lot doing pushups.” This serves as a warning for those who would sit on their laurels. One must be vigilant and continue spiritual work to remain sober. “One day at a time” shrinks the temporal span of this work to the smallness of one day.

A man shared that when he saw people getting multiple month and year sobriety anniversary chips, he thought they had to be lying. But people are discouraged from aiming for achieving the time spans of these chips. At the end of meetings in Austin, after the anniversary chips are given out, the moderator announces that newcomers may pick up a “desire chip,” which “signifies a desire to stop drinking for 24 hours.”<sup>35</sup> There is no promise to stop drinking forever. People have spoken about doing one hour at a time, or even one minute at a time. Some attended multiple meetings per day, attempting to not drink only until the next meeting. The time span of discomfort shrinks to hours or minutes, not months or years. Maggie said that her tendency to procrastinate comes in handy when she feels like drinking or eating sugar. She tells herself she will have the drink or donut the next day. She sets a short, finite time span to abstinence. It does not go on and on. However, the next day, she usually does not want the drink or donut. Sometimes people may feel overwhelmed and unsure of what to do. The slogan “Do the next right thing” may be employed at these times. The span of time is broken down even further into small, manageable tasks. If you are at home waiting for the next meeting to start, you could pay bills, take a shower, or call another alcoholic. Then you can think of something besides drinking. If one is facing a complex, long term task, it can be broken into small pieces that can be done immediately. If our being is characterized by a temporal unity, these alcoholics constricted its scale, made it as narrow and present as possible. This affects mood. Limiting

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<sup>35</sup> Or in another formulation, “signifies a desire to try our way of life for the next 24 hours.”

attention and thought to the day or hour at hand, or the next small task, and deliberately closing off a vaster temporal span, relieves the pressure of long-term abstinence.

This chapter explores the practices my informants used to contour the scale of their mental experience. When feeling distressed, they experienced their minds as vast and unbounded. To counteract this, they exploit the materiality of their bodies as well as discursive and writing practices to make their minds “small.” The examples that follow are organized by the type of “bigness” operated upon, and the type of “smallness” achieved.

### ***High Number and Density of Connections → Boundedness***

This section will consider a type of bigness manifested by a large number of thoughts that engender connections with other thoughts. The ethnographic illustrations are organized by the semiotic operations used to set bounds.

#### *Exteriorization and Localization*

Recovering alcoholics use the acronym HALT when they feel like drinking. HALT asks them, Are you hungry, angry, lonely, or tired? Maggie provided an example of this from her experiences as a tour manager for a traveling act. She developed an eating routine while in Austin that helped her avoid “binge foods” like processed flour and sugar. She ate certain foods at certain times of day. But on tour, they traveled on a bus with no set schedule for stops, so Maggie had no way to predict when she will get the food she needs. She also had conflicts with her two tourmates. Alicia drank to the point of being “annoying,” once urinating on the bus. Maggie felt Fiona, the artist on tour, did not manage her employees well. Maggie further complained that neither of the women helped set an eating schedule, and that although they were on the bus together most of the time, there was a lack of intimacy. She needed hugs and to talk about her needs, things she could get from her friends in Austin. Finally, she had not gone to an AA meeting in over a month. After about three weeks on tour, she said,

I felt a slip mentally. I felt this ego rise...I started getting these feelings I got when I was a dry drunk, that six month time period when I decided to stop but I wasn't going to meetings or anything. I would just feel like I was the only person in the world who knew what the fuck was going on and everyone else is stupid. I thought what I did was right, what I knew was right.

This situation came to a head one night when they finally stopped at a restaurant. When they arrived, Maggie was

...ignoring everyone, vibing out, “Get the fuck away from me. I’m here because I have to be.” I saw these bottles of Stolli and I was like, I’m going to order one.

On the heels of her mental slip, an alcoholic slip was possible.

I immediately thought, “No, you’re fucking not.” Then I thought, “What’s wrong with me?” I thought about HALT. I was like, “Stop for like five seconds and process. Am I hungry? Yes. I’m fucking starving. Am I angry? I’m fucking angry because I haven’t fucking eaten and these girls are pissing me off. Am I lonely? Yeah, there is nobody around that understands me. Have I been to a meeting? No, I haven’t been to a meeting in a month. Am I tired? Yeah, pretty tired.”

After HALTing, she got her tablet out and played Solitaire. She said,

I know I’m escaping, but it’s not debilitating for my health. So I played Solitaire for a while, and I was like, “Okay, you’re going to cry,” so I went to the bathroom for a while. It was harrowing. I knew it could happen to me. That’s one thing you remember when you go to meetings is that it can happen to you. It was just happening before my eyes, this desire to drink. So strong and so real that I was genuinely freaked out and scared and I almost cried at the table.

When she got back to the table, her food had arrived. She said, “I thought, This is going to be an immediate actual physical solution to my problems. I immediately felt somewhat better. I started cracking a smile, and I said, Thank you ladies for being patient with me while I went through that weirdness.”

Prior to HALTing, the bigness manifested as a large number and density of associations between grievances; a kind of emotional sprawl. Maggie said she was “hamster-wheeling left and right” by way of describing the emotional sprawl. “Hamster-wheeling” meant that she would have a thought and like a hamster running in a wheel rapidly generating motion, that thought would rapidly generate related thoughts. This happened with many different thoughts, hence “left and right.” Among these thoughts were her tourmates’ faults and shortcomings, both on and off tour in addition to the ones mentioned above. She was jealous that Alicia could drink with abandon, and was worried that she might endanger her sobriety. She felt anxiety to do her job perfectly. She considered walking out on the tour, yet she needed the money. This engendered the mood she called “ego rise.” Her tourmates’ behavior displayed any number of qualities, but

in that mood, she cared about qualities interpretable as “stupid.” She also cared about vodka bottles. Maggie worked in venues that served alcohol, but she usually disregarded its presence. However, at the restaurant, the bottles were not simply one of many non-interpreted objects in the restaurant, like the type of flooring. Instead, they were taken up semiotically as drinkable. Yet, having been sober for almost two years, Maggie could immediately respond to the thought “I’m going to order one” emphatically with “No, you’re fucking not.” She developed the habit of interpreting a desire to drink as an index of something going wrong with her, and remembered HALT as a technique for finding out what that might be.

HALTing first exteriorized and localized the emotional sprawl into three interoceptive states: hunger, tiredness, and anger. The semiotic ideology underlying HALT made the desire to drink an index of these states. It did the same for the number of social connections Maggie was engaged in at the moment. Because a causal linkage is posited between these four HALT objects and the desire to drink, there are obvious ways to avoid drinking. Because the women were stopped for the night, Maggie’s physical conditions of hunger and tiredness were easily solved. Second, the emotional sprawl was narrowed to anger at her tourmates, and rendered as a problem that causes drinking, rather than a factual representation of a state of affairs in the world. In other words, her tourmates are not actually stupid and annoying, she is merely angry. Finally, she interpreted her silence toward her tourmates and not going to meetings as exacerbating her loneliness. She could increase her social connections from zero to two fairly quickly.

HALTing served its stated purpose of stopping drinking. Rather than ordering a drink, Maggie sat at the table, took out her tablet, and played Solitaire. This may have been a breach of expected behavior during dinner at a restaurant (Garfinkel 1967), but as she said, it was not debilitating to her health. Physical changes followed. Her mood shifted to fear, and tears started to form. She relieved her need to cry in the restroom. When she returned, she saw food on the table and knew her hunger would be assuaged quickly. Anticipating relief from hunger, her mood shifted again. She started to feel better. Her stance toward her tourmates shifted from a basis of ego to the virtues of humility and honesty. She smiled at them, thanked them for being patient, and disclosed the “weirdness” she was experiencing. After the emotional sprawl was exteriorized, the vodka bottles were neutralized.

Her changed mood extended into the following day. In a bit of intimacy with Fiona, she told her that she really needed AA meetings because she was used to going four days a week.

Fiona gave her the car keys immediately. Maggie said, “So I go to a meeting and I get immediate relief. I’m nervous as hell because I haven’t gone for a month. I actually forced myself to speak because I wasn’t going to share. I was like, I don’t know what to do. I can’t make it to a meeting. I know these are excuses but sometimes you’re stuck on a bus. Three people came up to me after the meeting and they’re like, Hey, here’s this app. It helped a lot.” The fear also lingered. In one meeting, she told them that “I was actually standing on the edge, leaning over, looking down. That’s how I felt. Fortunately, I’m still very scared of what’s down there. I’ve been there and it sucks.” HALTING is not just a one-time trick to prevent oneself from drinking. It prompts you to consider the state of your body, and over time this becomes a habit of caring for your body. It also presents social connections as necessary, and brings a sense of urgency to cultivating them. It produces lingering moods of personal effectiveness, and a sense of heightened attention to danger signs of drinking. In the above example, Maggie’s experience of making small enabled her to continue the daily labor of reforming habit.

### *Capping*

Alan was aware that the materiality of writing produced particular effects, and exploited them in the techniques he used with his sponsees. He described the benefits of writing down one’s resentments while doing the Fourth Step:

When you put it on paper, it takes it from your head where it’s infinite to two dimensions on a piece of paper. It starts with a capital letter and ends with a period. There’s something metaphysical about that. Putting it on paper takes it from our imagination and congeals it into something physical in time and space, here, now, on paper. Remember one time we talked about the magnificent magnifying mind?<sup>36</sup> My resentment with my father is not just one event. It’s a thousand events. In my head, I’m not thinking about one resentment, I’m thinking about all of it. In dialogue, my instinct is to give it to you all at once. Last Tuesday, he did this, and last year he did that. When I put it on paper, it’s more manageable.

According to Alan, minds are infinite and have an infinite generative capacity. One resentment connects to another and another. Speech replicates this tendency. In contrast, paper is finite. An iconic relationship develops between the paper and the resentments. Paper is finite in size, and writing has a set beginning and end: a capital letter and a period. Resentments likewise become

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<sup>36</sup> This phrase is derived from “magic magnifying mind” from one of the personal stories in the Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001:407).

finite with a beginning and end. This caps the number of resentments that are connected. The bounded resentments take on the quality of manageability.

Alan has another capping exercise. When he encounters sponsees who “go on and on about their problems” and “can’t think of anything going right in their lives,” he has them write things that are going wrong on one side of a sheet of paper. He shared a recent example in which one of his sponsees wrote thirty seven things that were going wrong. Alan asked him, “Now how do you feel?” He answered, “Terrible.”

The guy’s problems didn’t extend beyond the edges of the paper. If I think about [problems], it never stops, but if I have to write it, eventually I get lazy and stop. When you put a list of all that’s going wrong on paper, it’s not an infinite list. There comes a point when I’m done putting them on paper. If it’s 37 things, at least it’s not 38.

Thinking and speaking are effortless compared to writing. This exercise exploits the physical exertion of writing as well as the size of the paper. Using one’s hand muscles and choosing words and putting them on paper are tedious and therefore #37 does not connect to a #38.

### *Flipping*

There is a second step to the problem listing exercise. Alan then has his sponsees turn over the paper, and on the blank side, write a “gratitude list”:

Then [they] flip over the paper and write down what’s going right. It’s about taking an eighteen-wheeler and getting it to stop. Usually the first one or two things are angry. When I force them to flip the paper and tell me about the things that are going right, the first one or two are throw-offs. I’m breathing. I have ten fingers and ten toes. But the more I stick with it with them, it starts to change their feelings.

Alan’s sponsee came up with four things going right. Alan asked, How do you feel? The sponsee answered, Better. There is an obvious iconic relationship between turning over a new leaf and a new start to feelings and thoughts. The blankness of the other side of the paper signifies the possibility of doing something different. That blank sheet then held four things going right. The 37 things going wrong were put out of view and replaced with those four things. The hope is that those four things rather than the 37 form the basis for further semiotic activity, such as pleasant thoughts and virtuous actions conducive to sobriety. Making small improved the sponsee’s mood, and instilled a mood of gratitude. Gratitude is conducive to staying sober, according to

AA. It affects what actions one takes. Gratitude comes and goes, which is why writing a gratitude list is a common practice.

There is another iconic relationship between flipping a piece of paper and turning one's will over to God, as in Alan's technique for Steps Six and Seven. Step Six is "Were entirely ready to have God remove all defects of character," while Step Seven is "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings." Alan has his sponsees use index cards for these steps. On the front of an index card, sponsees write a character defect and what need they use that defect to meet. Two examples from one of his sponsees: "I hate being disappointed. I'll try to control everything and everyone so the result will be want I want (emotional security)" and "I'm needy. I want other people to make me feel wanted, loveable, and worthy (social and sex relations)."

Flipping the card is an action meant to set off a particular chain of semiosis with actions under different descriptions. Alan explained, "Am I willing to give that up for something else that meets those same basic needs, but in a healthy way? The flipping is the willingness to do something different. And action." On the back of each index card, the sponsee writes the "Seventh Step prayer":

My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001:76).

Alan asks his sponsees to carry the index cards with them. He explained that the Fourth and the Sixth Steps teach people to become mindful about their character defects and in what situations they are apt to recur. At those times, the cards act as a "reset button." Alan gave an example of a man in his car in front of a bathhouse. He said, "You take out the cards, shuffle through them, and find the one you need. When you're ready to give up the easy way of getting your needs met, you flip the card over" and say the prayer. Ian's experience serves as an illustration of the mechanics of the reset button. He sought anonymous sex with multiple partners at bathhouses not simply to relieve a physical urge. He did so because sex was something he was good at. He was told he was good at it. He felt powerful when he could bring a man to orgasm, and because he was aging, he felt he had to do this as many times as possible before he got too old to attract anyone. As he got older, he felt more and more "invisible." Yet, at the same time, Ian felt he was being reckless, and knew that when he hit 60 or so, the bathhouse would stop working. He

witnessed the much diminished experiences of men older than he, and it disturbed him to imagine himself as one of them. His own luck at “hooking up” had been decreasing over time. He began to see going to the bathhouse as what Alan called “an easy way of getting your needs met.” The complexity of Ian’s bathhouse experiences was reduced to one concept: taking the easy way out. The hope is that Ian will apprehend the words “easy way out” and interpret his behavior as such. There are other, sustainable ways to feel visible, powerful, and competent, although it is no easy task to discover what those things may be. Yet, he can let go of the fact that the bathhouse still works after a fashion, turn his will over to God, trust that he will receive guidance, and drive away from the bathhouse.

### ***Plenitude → Coherent Internal Object***

Greg and James sought immersion in a single memory while writing: the smallness of one sustained narrative. Michael, Evan, and Vincent sought to transfer something in their heads into their journals: a specific pre-existing inner object. As mentioned in the Introduction, how Americans understand themselves as persons is centered upon interiority. Their efforts to transfer something within them onto the page as little altered as possible are based on a language ideology of inner reference (Carr 2011) and upon the notion of sincere speech, which does not add or subtract in words that which was already there within inner states (Keane 2002). Yet, as they tried to express a coherent internal object in sincere speech, they were distracted by things in their surroundings and other thoughts, memories, and concerns. I will refer to this kind of bigness as plenitude. This term refers to the sheer number of objects in their mental processes and environment that may be engaged with. The smallness my informants tried to achieve is not the same as sleeping in a sensory deprivation tank to minimize sensory stimuli, or clearing one’s mind during meditation. Their techniques are material engagements to produce a coherent internal object out of the plenitude. This section will be divided by two types of plenitude.

#### *Computer-generated Plenitude*

Step Four inventories tend to be hand-written. Alan said that in over twenty years of sponsoring people, he does not remember getting a typed inventory. Part of the reason is that some people print out a template and fill it in, or they do the inventory in rehab, where they do not have access to a computer. Aside from these cases, it seemed to be an unspoken

understanding that the inventory is hand written. But Greg and James made a conscious effort to handwrite theirs to produce detailed, sustained narratives.

Greg kept a spreadsheet of his Fourth Step personal inventory. It contained a number of questions that he checked: Did he owe anyone an amends? Did he go to a meeting today? Did he take a moment to meditate? Did he lie? Was he reliable; did he meet all obligations? Did he ask for help? He printed out this sheet once every few weeks to check those questions and fill in any new resentments. He made sure to fill in new information by hand. The first column of the inventory requires a name. He has to first think the name, then remember how to spell it. When he remembers the spelling, he remembers the memories and interactions associated with that person. Entering a name into the first column leads to a succession of memories for Greg, memories that he generally preferred not to revisit:

After someone does me wrong, I don't like to say or think their name. I say, that person or that girl. It's almost like if you say the devil's name, he will come. If I don't hear the name, they won't come to mind. But you can't get past the first column without writing a name. As the memories crawl through my head like ants, the ones that bite are the ones I pay attention to. The handwriting helps a lot with this. If I'm typing on a computer, it's capable of doing so many things. It can show me movies. I can give up and look at Facebook. But if I'm looking at a piece of paper, it does nothing for me. It waits. It's like, "Hello! I'm not full!" If I'm looking at it, I have to fill it until it's full. A computer will fill up for me.

Writing a name and seeing it on paper calls up a number of uncomfortable memories, but Greg is after specific ones—the ones that bite. The paper's blankness acts as an affordance that invites him to fill it by following the biting memories, allowing them to expand with detail, whereas, if he is on his computer,

I'm no longer thinking about the way she flipped her hair when she broke up with me near Christmas, in fact on Christmas, she had two gifts but took only one, but I spelled Brooklyn wrong, then I lose the feeling. I'm checking where my hands are on the keys. I hit backspace...you don't need to hit backspace! Who cares how you spell things!

James reported similar issues with the material qualities of typing that Greg did:

Pacing enters into that equation. You're limited to how fast you can put things on paper. When you're typing, you go really fast and you can always go back and erase what you wrote. And if you're not good at typing, you have to hunt and peck for the keys and you get disconnected from the thoughts. You detach emotionally from the process.

When writing the Fourth Step by hand, James said, “I feel more connected and more present in the work. On a computer, I get distracted by all kinds of things. On paper, there’s just paper. There’s no Facebook on paper. It’s the right technology for soul searching.”

The material characteristics of computers engender a large variety of possible object-connections. Through WiFi, through a broadband internet connection, the computer can connect them to movies, other people through social media, and an apparently endless number of other applications. These objects are designed to attract attention and stimulate absorption. Greg mentioned that he associates his computer with his job. Ian also described the difficulty of using a work computer for anything else. When he works at home, he sits at his work desk in his office chair. He looks at the computer screen, with his hands on the keyboard or else with his right hand on the mouse precisely placed next to the keyboard. He jumps from task to task in different windows, and while he waits for software code to build, he looks at news sites on the internet. In that posture and in that place, he falls into those computer use habits, and is therefore unable to maintain the sustained concentration necessary for his creative writing side projects. At his work desk, he keeps opening and jumping to other windows, so he installed a different desk in another room dedicated to creative writing.

Computers are attached to keyboards. Your fingers have to be on the right keys and you have to press them in the correct order. Keyboards have editing functions. If you press the wrong keys, you hit backspace. You must occasionally look at the keys. You can look at the words on the screen, reconsider them, and then delete and start over quickly and effortlessly. The keys and their functions increase the number of objects that can be engaged with physically and mentally. In contrast, paper is almost by itself. It has physical connections to a writing utensil, hand, and writing surface. Greg and James did not write with pencils but with pens, which lack the editing function of an eraser. After picking up a pen, you do not have to look at it the way you have to look at a keyboard. You can forget about it. Because Greg and James are engaged with fewer objects, they can focus concentration on one memory and create one sustained, detailed narrative. The physical effort of putting words on paper by hand also helps make small. Physical limitations cause James to proceed more slowly. This slow pace facilitates lingering on details and the mood produced by the memory.

For Greg, handwriting “makes sincere.” He pinpointed the moment that handwriting became important to him:

At a party a few years ago, I met an expert on handwriting analysis. Everyone kept bugging him to show off his skills, so he passed a paper around a table and asked everyone there to write any sentence and he'll say what the handwriting tells [him]. When he got to me, he said, "This person doesn't know how other people see them or how they see themselves either. This person has anxiety and insecurity."

Greg said that as soon as the expert said all that, everyone at the table looked at him. Greg said, "So I asked myself, What did I do before I wrote it? I had thought, I need to write it cleanly because someone is going to see it. That's what I do. [In contrast] The Fourth Step is figuring out who I am." The friends who knew Greg well recognized him in the stranger's description. Yet, Greg was surprised that how he thinks and feels was apparent to a stranger. After this experience, handwriting became an indexical icon of his hidden, true self. Thus, handwriting grants access to a sub-part of himself buried within. Handwriting makes the hidden available in other ways:

I have a bullshit generator somewhere in my brain. That's the only way I interacted with people before I got sober. When I write, I may as well write something worth something. Writing bullshit just makes my hand hurt. Typing doesn't wear out your hands as fast, so it's easier to bullshit. It's economy of energy. Am I really willing to expend this much energy to write things that are not true?

The speed and ease of typing results in a small investment of effort, and therefore fewer stakes in what is produced. However, Greg's anticipation of interoceptive sensations of muscle fatigue and pain leads him to get straight to exposing hidden, true things for narration.

James also made use of the interoceptive sensations in his hands. He started writing in journals several years before he got sober in 2013. The first seemed hastily written and was sometimes illegible. It contained brief descriptions of meetings and other recovery activities, and one longer entry about a painful interaction with his grandmother. James directed me to the most recent journal, a moleskine rather than a yellow legal pad, because it was the best one. He said that I would be surprised at his handwriting:

The fountain pen makes all the difference. I was writing with a \$1000 work of art with an unmatched performance. When you're writing with a ball point pen, you have to press down hard. But a fountain pen flows over the paper. It's like art therapy.

The entries in the moleskine journal were perfectly aligned and the letters were carefully formed. However, it was not simply the appearance of the writing that mattered to James.

There's something more engaged about that tactile experience. You have to move at a slower pace. It's like using cash instead of a cash card. You're more connected to it when you write than when you type. You have a connection with the paper. Writing each word on paper opens up other thoughts.

He contrasted writing with a fountain pen with “scratching” with a ball point pen. A fountain pen allowed him to have “an immersive experience”:

I could go back and dig into those things and touch on the feelings and tap into the qualities of the experience of those moments. This was enhanced by removing me from my present experience. I could escape worries, excitement, whatever, to flesh out these gems – or petrified turds even – and get them on paper that maybe otherwise would be unexcavated. I could get *in there*. I was not distracted by static and clutter. I could flow below that. The quality of the experience was enhanced. Maybe I wouldn't have been able to focus or make connections without my ability to clear out distracting ideas.

The entries in the moleskine were quite different than the yellow pad journal. The moleskine journal recorded the deterioration of a long term relationship. Each entry centered around an incident that occurred that day. In one, he wrote in detail an argument he had with his girlfriend at a vacation house. He tried to help clear the table after dinner, but his girlfriend ordered him outside. He stormed outside, walked to the end of the dock, and began smoking. He ruminated on his smoking, that he needed to stop because he had no endurance. He had snorkeled that day for the first time, but could not enjoy it because he had trouble breathing. He wondered whether he could keep up with her. He fretted about what she thought of him, if she thought he was just tagging along. While reading this entry, I could see the table covered with dirty dishes, the sun on the deck, James smoking. I felt his anxiety and his nagging fear that he was not good enough for this woman. I finished that journal feeling anxious and depressed. Whether it was the fountain pen, accumulated experience in writing, or both, the narration in the moleskine was highly detailed and vivid.

James tried to “go back,” “dig into,” and “get in” his memories. These terms present them as objects already formed, whole, and inside him somewhere. The words “gem” and “petrified turds” imply things to be excavated from a depth. He had to shut out present stimuli, the “static and clutter,” the worries and excitement they produced in him. The plenitude of objects connected to a computer produces static and clutter, as do the interoceptive sensations of his hand “scratching” with a ball point pen and pressing down hard on paper. Using a fountain pen

created sensations of less exertion on hand and arm muscles and less pressure on the paper. His hand could therefore flow over paper with a fountain pen, connecting word to word, facilitated one thought opening up another, flowing beneath distracting present stimuli.

### *The Plenitude of Audience*

James, Michael, Evan, and Vincent all kept journals. These journals are an outgrowth of a long tradition of diaries, a genre found historically in various cultures. More specifically, they resemble a subgenre of diary writing for self-analysis and self-fashioning, such as the diaries kept by Puritans. Puritans recorded their daily moods, hopes, fears, behaviors, sorrows, and joys for later examination (Wolf 1968). They measured their behavior against Biblical standards, and recorded their dreams, sins and temptations, and deliverances by God from these threats (De Welles 1988, Rose 1989, Todd 1992).

In more contemporary times, using writing for therapeutic ends grew out of forms of psychotherapy that focus on expressing stressful thoughts, feelings, and memories. Studies in recent decades have explored the therapeutic benefit of writing, increasing its use. Writing also makes therapeutic benefits available to people who lack access to care, are reluctant to receive psychotherapy, or fear social repercussions for talking about stressful events (Lepore and Smyth 2002). It is also a common form of self-help. For example, James and Evan used Julie Cameron's *The Artists Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. Cameron, a recovered alcoholic, developed the techniques in the book based upon her efforts to re-learn how to write after giving up alcohol. The key is to "unblock" creativity through the core practice of the "morning pages." She instructs readers to write three "strictly stream of consciousness" pages every morning in longhand. No one is to read the pages. Even the writer should not read them for the first eight weeks. Eventually, the pages should lead artists to "...find our own quiet center, the place where we hear the still, small voice that is at once our creator's and our own" (1992, 12). The pages should simply be one's "hand moving across the page and writing whatever comes to mind." It could be literally anything, including "I can't think of anything to write" (1992, 10). The point is to abandon all standards of what "good" writing might be, and write down any thoughts whatsoever, even if it is silly, ungrammatical, repetitive, or fragmented. Even whiny or petty complaints are good, for "these small worries eddy through our subconscious and muddies our day. Get it on the page" (1992, 11).

Evan and James both used journal writing to get out the thoughts muddying their day. Evan said, “I have a lot of things bouncing around in my head all the time. A constant barrage of thoughts, left and right, spurred on by every little thing around me. It’s overwhelming.” He described writing as “decluttering” or “housecleaning” his head so that he could pick out the important thoughts. James said he initially tried journaling to clarify his thoughts. He was 36 at the time we met and a few months shy of two years sober. When I accompanied him on trips in his car, he kept up a rapid comic commentary on the people he observed, firing jokes, or else he told stories with elaborate improvised dialogue. He was involved in some creative endeavors, so I suggested he write down his more memorable jokes and stories. He answered, “I can’t even remember what I said or thought five minutes ago. It goes so fast. I need a secretary.” In his first journal, written in a yellow legal pad, he wrote, “I’m sitting here in this coffeeshop. It’s hard to slow down enough to catch one thought and expand on it.” James’ journals eventually began to resemble the genre of memoir, as exemplified by the passage I described. There was a narrative arc to the whole journal that focused on his relationship, and each entry was a coherent rendition of some incident significant to the progression of it. Evan, Michael, and Vincent kept journals for the therapeutic purpose described by Cameron.

Evan is a writer, and differentiated his journal writing from his other writing, which is typed and produced to be seen by an audience. In an email he wrote,

The writing that I put in my journals, it’s private. It’s mine. It’s more intimate. It’s my headspace spilling out onto the page. By doing it with a pen or pencil as opposed to the screen, I keep the personal stuff that I do in my journals separate from the public things I do that are usually typed. As a side effect, the stuff that’s in my journal is often much less polished, much more immediate, and is usually a bit more weighty and emotionally heavy than my typed writing. When I’m typing, I feel compelled to produce text that’s going to read well even when no one is going to read it. Even if no other person reads it, I read it as someone else would read it. I’m always trying to produce text with an eye to, How will other people read this? Will they find it interesting or amusing or whatever? When I’m writing longhand, I don’t care how it reads. I’m just trying to figure out the point I’m trying to uncover. I tried to do a typed journal once but it ended up feeling either like a blog post or like writing, both of which interfered with the natural outpouring that I was trying for.

Evan distinguishes between writing that is “private/mine” versus “public.” His public writing has an audience, which includes people actually reading the work, or himself looking at his work through the eyes of those people. Like Greg with his job, writing on a computer is connected to

Evan's job of writing for an audience. His hands on the keyboard and his eyes on the screen are associated with taking the point of view of an audience member. In that mode, he brings in standards of what is interesting or amusing. These standards could have come from classes he took, comments from peers, reviews critics have written, or public discourses on what good writing is. The techniques suggested by *The Artist's Way* eliminate an audience. The writer should abandon any standard of what might comprise good writing, for that smuggles in an audience. If no one is looking, not even the writer, utterances can be spontaneous and quick. There is no delay while one examines one's writing from different perspectives.

Evan made another distinction, an interior/exterior one between his headspace and the paper. He used several of what Michael Reddy calls "conduit" metaphors (as cited in Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 10-1) when describing the type of writing he aimed for in his journal: "point I'm trying to uncover," "headspace spilling out onto the page," and "natural outpouring." These terms indicate that he posits ideas as objects that he places into language (a container) and send them along a conduit to paper on the outside of his head. This metaphor masks writing as a contextual communicative process. According to Evan's conduit metaphor, the point or headspace are preformed objects waiting to be properly placed into a container. Because the objects are not intentionally altered to please any audience, they feel as if they arrive on paper as-is. The speed and spontaneity of audience-free (or audience-reduced, at least) writing facilitates a sense of a direct, unaltered connection. In the April 14, 2012 entry he wrote, "I feel something coming together in my head. Some kind of milestone message about this year. How it's been going. I don't care whether or not people want to hear it. This is me, all me, me and only I matter in my pursuit of my sobriety." The milestone message emerged in his April 25, 2012 entry, and was the story of the car accident I excerpted in Chapter 3. He wrote later that day,

I did my pages everyday this week. I'm starting to feel better about them, that they're more purposeful, that they're starting to cut through the other noise that's taking up space in my head. They're starting to take on a greater form than just idle ranting. Something is pushing through.

In Evan's view, the story in its conduit "pushed through" to his journal. In his pages for the next day, he wrote that he had been waiting to start the milestone piece for months, and on top of that, it was good without his intending it to be. He wrote, "I don't remember when and where the idea for the opening angle emerged, but it was delivered unto me and given to the page and it

WORKED.” His writing felt like something pushing through from within, rather than a result of writing and cognitive techniques.

Although Michael did not read *The Artist’s Way*, he used its language of blockage. He said, “That’s what I get out of journaling—a sense of resolution. I’m more likely to write in my journal for questions like, I’m unhappy and don’t know why. I’m blocked. It helps me figure out something I need to know in that moment.” Michael provides another example of how the material qualities of writing create a sense of outpouring. He edits less when writing longhand because of “technical reasons.” When typing on a computer, even when determined not to edit himself, he finds himself looking at the screen because the words appear in a beautiful font and are typeset already, so it is difficult to resist glancing at the screen. He can see everything he wrote in one glance. But he cannot read his handwriting with the speed he reads typeset writing on a screen. He said, “In handwriting, one sentence takes up more physical space than writing on a screen. I can’t read a sentence in a glance in my own handwriting than in a glance in a word processing program. It prevents me from rereading and mulling over and correcting myself.” Editing a document entails looking at it from varied third person perspectives, and handwriting removes this ability.

Handwriting enabled him to “amble” more so than typing while trying to figure out what he needs to focus on. He said that when he is uncomfortable talking about a particular problem, it is easier to “approach the subject from behind or the side or a roundabout way. If there’s an idea I’m trying to express and I’m having trouble articulating it, I can take several swings at it until I get it right.” If it takes him a long time to write this in his journal, even if he rambles on for pages at a time, he is comfortable with that in a way he is not while typing. When he is typing, he feels more pressure to get to the point quickly. He will be in the middle of handwriting a phrase or line and he will have an “Aha” moment.

9/25/15

When I was working, I told myself that as long as I got 6 hours of sleep, I could function okay the next day. But that’s not true — as I’ve found out now, only 6 means that I’m sluggish and depressed. 8 every night seems to be essential.

I slept really soundly last night. But going to bed at 2, I woke up at 10:30, which was way too late. Well, I did wake up earlier at 8, but went back to sleep, because of what I wrote

above—that I wouldn't function well today on 6 hours of sleep. 8 1/2 has had its own problems, though—I've been groggy and sluggish all day.

My goal has been to figure out what I need to do to in order to feel well, or at least not bad, during the day, so that I can work well, or at least get some work done. I thought sobriety would be enough, but it hasn't been. I've figured out some things. Leigh was right, drinking more water seems to be staving off the daily headaches that I was getting post-sobriety. I also know that an morning workout of some kind helps. Getting enough sleep helps, obviously. Though doing what's necessary to get that sleep has been difficult. Specifically the evenings. I'm quite happy to spend hours online jumping from article to article or FB post to FB post. I feel like I need to do either a book or movie in my last hours awake, because focusing on just one thing would slow down my mind. Although that may be the problem right there: I don't want to slow down at night. I feel like I'm finally engaged. That's still the biggest problem, moving my peak time from the evening, where it's been for years, into the daytime.

The "Aha" in the above entry is his discovery that he has difficulty sleeping because he feels engaged at night, and wants to stay engaged by being online, and not slow down to sleep. Like Evan, the sense of insight emerging from within is facilitated by removing editing functions and thereby, an audience.

Maggie provided another illustration of Michael's rambling. She had more troubles the first time she went on tour with Fiona than the second. She called me on the third day. She was quite upset and crying, and told me that she felt like she could not get away from her tourmates. They were riding together in an RV all day and when they stopped, they were in one hotel room. She had not eaten or slept well in those three days. Later, after our call, she went for a walk, but it did not help. When she returned to the hotel room, she sat on her bed in the corner with the other two in their corners. Maggie said before she went on tour, she decided on three rules for herself. The first was "unconditional love" and the second was "Don't do anything you'd regret." She could not remember the third. In accordance with the second rule, she sat on her bed and decided to deal with the others using the principle, "Don't say anything if you don't have anything nice to say." She said, "I needed some sense of privacy. I put headphones on and scribbled in my AA book, writing down everything I need to say in that moment, my resentments, everything. I couldn't read the Big Book. My brain couldn't even figure out how to get to a meeting. So some little voice in my head was like, Write it down." Here is an excerpt from her journal:

Needs not getting met. Feeling trapped. Resentful of powerlessness. Not really upset we didn't go out, but why do I feel like I'm trapped? I can't get away. Put in a corner. Need to clarify what exactly is expected of me. Food, shelter, protection, sleep. Why is this so hard? Why do I want to cry? What is this feeling over me? Trapped, locked in a corner, put somewhere against my will, at the mercy of someone else. I agreed to this? It doesn't matter. Right now matters. So crying is good? Why do I want to stop the crying? I'm used to being alone, and now I can't find peace. Now the restlessness will not stop. Now this is really uncomfortable. I feel like I'm stuck. I'm wandering around in my own mind alone, and to think I really thought I had a chance to manipulate it all? And to think everything was covering my body like a thick blanket, like a shield. You can't shield yourself.

She interpreted the "shield" as herself saying, "Everything's fine. I can handle this. There's no problem." She had been wondering why her tourmates did not give her any of their breakfast bars that morning, but realized she could have asked. She said, "The feeling was, I was helpless, but then I realized, Wait, I'm not helpless." She remembered she was the tour manager. "Obviously they're not getting their needs met because he's drinking his away and she's diet-pilling hers away, so this is going to be part of your job, have fun! But first you gotta take care of yourself because these two aren't going to do that. Why do I even expect *that*? For some weird reason *that* was an expectation. But I'm 37 years old. I can take care of myself."

Vincent is the final example of audience-free writing. In problematic situations, writing made him feel better because he was not saying or doing something potentially harmful. But it had to be "writing for its own sake," rather than goal-oriented writing or writing for an audience. He wrote in a Google doc journal, which he used when feeling anxious, worried, or confused. He said, "I wasn't trying to seek a resolution of whatever problem I had in my head. It made the unbearable things, divorce and all that, self-doubt and all that, seem like normal and bearable. Less abnormal. Getting that stuff out of my head and then I'm going to look at it."

Vincent developed a habit years ago that helped with legal writing in his work as a public defender. He "got into the zone" by eliminating the editing functions of the computer. He typed with his eyes closed or not looking at the keyboard or screen. Typing in this manner helped with what he called "purgative writing" or "trying to get the shit out." Vincent described writing as a "new mode of processing that doesn't involve doing the thing I hate most about myself, yelling at someone I love, or the thing I hate second-most, clamming up and allowing resentments to fester." With the "purgative" writing, he realized he could "get all the shit out on paper without hurting anyone." He explained,

Seeing the written words on the page slows the process of getting the words out. But editing, while super important to writing, also easily leads to “self-editing” and becomes more about calculated image projection than a sincere expression of emotion. And finding a place to sincerely express my emotions, even but really, especially my really crummy, intolerable, gross ones, was key to feeling that I had some ability to look at them honestly, potentially change them or drum roll! Accept the ones I could not change!

I started to realize I didn’t need to say everything I thought was true or important to say. If I let myself be unmediated when writing, then in conversations, fights, et cetera, I didn’t feel so pressured to get something out. In part because writing open-endedly made me so much more acutely aware that even when I utterly thought I knew what was right, true, or important, I was quite often wrong.

Like Evan, Vincent wanted to move the “unmediated” contents of his head, a pre-existing object rather than an edited one, outside into a Google doc. Like Greg, he used non-edited writing to “make sincere.” He wanted to “purge” his feelings, and calculated self-presentation for an audience was a different kind of experience than that. If he did not objectify his gross feelings into words in a document, he posited a semiotic chain set off by them. While these objects remained in his head, so to speak, he had a disposition to interpret them as signifying abnormality. In addition, he posited an indexical link between his yelling or having festering resentments and the unpurged feelings. When the feelings were objectified in their audience-free (what he called unmediated) form, he developed a new semiotic habit. He evaluated them using standards such as honesty. He could typify them as normal. He also interpreted them as signifying qualities such as wrongness rather than truth. This evaluation in turn opened up possibilities for actions other than yelling, such as changing or accepting his feelings. Here is an example from his journal:

1/25/15

Played music to a crowded, unengaged bar. It was horrendous. I became a small, closed-eyed child - self-critical, wondering what was I doing wrong; why didn’t they like me?; I guess I’m not that good. So I sang louder. I sang my heart out. I did the opposite of what I believe gets people’s attention: I tried harder, and louder, to get their attention. It didn’t work. I became angry at them. Because I was not supposed to be angry, or upset, I was polite, and simply ceded the stage when requested.

I was then playing backups for Steve, with his soul band. I was trying to sublimate my desire for how things should sound to the group will. I was trying so hard to not try and be the center of attention that I had been denied when I was playing my own music, solo.

I started tallying - how many of Steve's songs had I written, or co-written? How much credit was I getting? Not enough!

Through all of this the fundamental desires were ok, if somewhat unrealistic: be loved; play good music; get credit for my creativity. But the need for love and recognition felt upsetting - I was forced to be in the background, even when I had written the song; co-written the song; arranged the horn lines; made it what it was! But the cycle of thoughts didn't really stop, except when the music was good and I was performing all right. Then, I could relax into it a little bit. And I was, of course, still keenly aware through all of this of my own deficiencies.

Ya.

He did not feel comfortable sharing an "unmediated" journal entry with me, but this entry was intermediate between those and another entry he emailed, which was a poem about his mother, written quite self-consciously with the requirements of that genre in mind. Despite not being precisely "purgative writing," he wrote details of his performance, creating a rather unflattering portrait of himself. This was prose for self-reflection rather than flattering self-presentation, and could serve as source material for him to find the pre-existing objects of "fundamental desires." In any case, the semiotic operations he performed on this audience-free(ish) writing allowed him to do ethical work for his sobriety. He had been trying to figure out to what extent that experience related to AA notions of self-will. "To me, it was about whether I could get out of the driver's seat and play a supporting role. In Buddhism, ego is harnessed for some other good."

### ***Cybernetics and Recovery***

According to the fellowship's description of AA, it can be summarized as a spiritual program that emphasizes action. This chapter focuses on the latter pragmatic aspect. It is a commonplace that people experience a great deal of discomfort when undergoing major transitions in their life, including sobriety. Practices such as "One day at a time," HALT, and writing persist in AA because of their practical value. A close phenomenological examination of these material practices revealed that these are scaling techniques to produce desired forms of mental experience. Undesirable forms of mental experience are expressed in terms of feelings such as "overwhelmed" and "hopeless," but these are not self-evident in their meaning. I present them here through metaphors of "bigness." A problem feels as large as an automobile because it is diffuse and undifferentiated. Total abstention from alcohol brings to the forefront the future

aspect of the temporal unity of past, present, and future. As alcoholics project themselves into their alcohol-free future, they experience a sense of “forever.” “Hamster-wheeling left and right” and “everything going wrong in my life” are sensations resulting from the generation of a high density of associations between mental objects. Interacting with objects with large numbers of connections to other objects, such as computers, invite users into a plenitude of engagements. Recovery as the ethical reformation of everyday habits requires sustained attention and labor. The aforementioned forms of distress are not conducive to performing this labor. AA members use practical, mundane techniques to transform mood. What this chapter offers is a detailed rendering of these states of distress, and the material processes by which people relieve their distress.

I used the term “mental experience” to describe these states of distress. I will clarify what I mean by “mental.” In my analysis, mental experiences are not phenomena occurring within a delimited mind/brain. My analysis in this chapter was inspired by Gregory Bateson’s (1972) cybernetics approach to mind. In this view, mind is immanent within a circuit of brain plus body plus environment, and it cannot be said that any one part of this circuit, such as the brain, has unilateral control over the entire system. For example, when a man cuts down a tree with an axe, each stroke of the axe is modified depending upon the shape of the cut left by the previous stroke. This mental process is brought about by a total system of tree-eyes-brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree, and this total system is what has the characteristics of mind. This view is in contrast to the typical Western view in which a person would say, “I cut down the tree.” This phrase contains the assumptions that a delimited agent, the “self,” performs a delimited action upon a delimited object. Mind becomes reified by the notion that since the self acted upon the tree, the self must be a “thing.”

Rather than the notion of a delimited self moving about the world having experiences, the ethnographic examples presented should be approached as containing configurations of things that form circuits. While undertaking a particular recovery practice, each person assembled a different configuration of things to form a new circuit. The initial and ending circuits were attuned to different phenomena and were capable of different semiotic operations. For example, Maggie’s experience of distress on tour began with herself in the confinement of the tour bus with her tourmates and her hamster wheeling thoughts. Her being-with her tourmates can be characterized as “ignoring” and “resentment.” She was in a tour bus on the road for hours at a

time, which limited the possibilities of changing the components within her particular mental circuit. When they arrived at the restaurant, the configuration shifted to herself, her tourmates, and vodka bottles. This configuration became attuned to the possibility of drinking. At this point, through HALT, she introduced parts of her body other than her thoughts into the circuit: hunger emanating from her empty stomach, sensations of fatigue, and feelings of loneliness and anger. This new circuit became attuned to ameliorating the unpleasant sensations in her body and generated the signs, objects, and interpretants described in that example.

Cybernetics is an additional, productive way to think about how recovering alcoholics operate as distributed agents. Each of the ethnographic examples begins and ends with different material configurations with things in a circuit. When Tom becomes Tom + other AA members, his mental experience shifts from having an automobile-sized problem to a baseball-sized one. When Alan's sponsee formed the configuration sponsee + Alan + paper + pen, his attitude shifted from "everything going wrong" to gratitude. When person + computer + keyboard functions + apps becomes person + paper + pen, the resultant mental experience becomes the emergence of a sustained narrative or the apparent emergence of a pre-existing mental object. In short, although I use terms such as thoughts, emotions, and feelings, these phenomena are understood to take place within a circuit that extends beyond the mind/brain.

## CHAPTER VII

### Conclusion

My dissertation analyzed the moral transformation experienced by alcoholics in Austin, Texas. It focused on the central problem they faced while they were drinking, when they stopped, and while they were rebuilding their lives: the questions Who am I? and How should I live? This moral transformation did not occur solely inside their heads, but in their being-in-the-world, which is a threefold unity comprised of 1) particular ways of existing, 2) within cultural and historical contexts, 3) and material engagements with people and things. I will briefly summarize the argument of the dissertation before exploring some of its implications.

An neuroscientist specializing in addiction told me that she defines addiction as the point at which people start choosing the substance over other things. Certainly, one of the criteria by which my informants self-identified as alcoholics was the extent to which thinking about, obtaining, and drinking alcohol came to dominate their lives. However, I observed that my informants used alcohol and drugs to live an ordinary life. For them, drinking and using were not opposed to other things in life or living in an alternative sub-culture. There are prosaic, practical ways that alcohol helped them get on with their life.

Many people may not find the notion that people used alcohol as a tool initially surprising. Knowledge of alcohol's many practical uses is embedded within our language: it is a crutch, a social lubricant, liquid courage. What my research reveals is that for a group of alcoholics, the relationship between alcohol and its results, whether relief from stress or becoming talkative, is not a simple, functional means-end relationship. Years ago during my preliminary fieldwork, Ian sent me a link to a poem titled "The Gray Side of the Moon." His email said, "For came-of-age-in-the-80s junkie meth-head tattooed punks, this is 'Howl' all over again." The poet, Bucky Sinister, survived that particular era and got sober in 2002. The poem is a eulogy for friends who did not. I was struck by the following stanzas:

Every summer,  
the American Tornado dropped Dorothies into San Francisco.  
We were the unwashed and faded-gray version of the Lollipop Guild,  
greeting them upon arrival.

This is for the little girl  
who would rather have a meth problem  
than a weight problem.

This is for the little boy  
who tattooed his face  
so no one would touch him that way anymore.

This is for every little boy and girl  
who stood between home and a tornado,  
weighed the options,  
and took a chance on the twister.

This poem resonated with Ian and my memories of addicts I knew because it recalled the sense of being carried along by forces beyond ones' control – the twister – and how seemingly functional behaviors are entangled with purposes directed to broader problems of existence. The author uses the diminutives “little girl” and “little boy” when writing of a grown-up meth addict and tattooed punk. Ian and I read this as the sympathy of someone who sees fellow addicts playing out what they learned about life when they were small. If you scratch the surface of functional behaviors, there is often more. Ian's friend Steve killed himself four years before Ian sent me that email. Steve said he could not stop drinking because alcohol helped him relax on dates. Sounded simple, until you asked him why he could not relax around women. If you questioned him long enough, out would come pronouncements of his worthlessness, recitations of incidents from the past as proof, and the conviction that without alcohol, he would be alone for the rest of his life, back in his Kansas “home” of the final stanza stripped of Technicolor. Hearing about what happened to him hurt, but it did not surprise. What happened to him made sense if you knew him.

When my informants stopped drinking, they could no longer use alcohol to achieve their purposes. Yet their reaction went beyond simple puzzlement over how to do the things they used to do with alcohol, although their reactions were fortunately not as extreme as Steve's. They did not merely miss the pleasure they felt from drinking, nor did they suffer only from craving. Maryam did not merely find it difficult to have small talk with multiple people at work functions;

this had implications for the kind of person she was. During my fieldwork, she would remain sober for a few months, but would start drinking again because she could not bear being, in her words, “mousy and boring.” The depth of their pain when they said things like “Who am I now?” requires an explanation, as does their commitment to using alcohol over trying different ways to relax or become more talkative. For them, the array of ways to engage with people and things in their lives were not modular techniques that could easily replace one another. Resistance to novel techniques of sober living is not simply due to stubbornness, irrationality, or fear. Their commitment to alcohol deserves serious scrutiny. If their relationship to alcohol were simply one of means-ends, then different techniques for achieving a social goal should be more fungible. Heidegger’s concept of tool is therefore useful for analyzing relationships between people and objects that are not means-end. Heideggerian tool use as an approach connects alcohol’s practical usefulness to broader ethical projects of becoming a kind of person.

This phenomenological concept creates an inclusiveness in the types of phenomena that enter into a semiotic analysis. I will reiterate Deborah’s example, the woman with a boring husband. Her husband took care of her when she drank too much, and she wanted to reciprocate this care. She told me about an evening at their house. They were each in their chairs, he was going on at length about David McCullough’s biography of John Adams, and she was drinking. She was a whiskey connoisseur, and she sat there quietly with a pleasant expression on her face enjoying her whiskey. What are the tools involved in this example? The first tool is whiskey. This tool produces molecular effects in the body, some of which produce physical effects such as relaxation of her body and a hedonic impact. Whiskey as a tool gives rise to other tools: perceivable physical transformations. This dissertation is the beginning of an inquiry into how perceivable interoceptive data enter semiosis. As mentioned in the Introduction, anthropology has historically been concerned with publically available sign vehicles.

The physical effects of the whiskey have any number of qualities, but Deborah’s mood and purpose influences what sign-object relations come to her attention and how she interprets them. For Deborah, these effects allow her to sit still and smile at her husband. For her husband, her stillness and smiling signifies listening. These are linkages between molecular activity, the Deborah’s purposes and values, and her husband’s evaluation of her. For Deborah, she is reciprocating the care her husband gives her, and for both of them, she is a good wife. In their evaluations, they are drawing upon cultural notions of companionate marriage and how spouses

should be there for each other. That the whiskey enabled Deborah to constitute herself as a good wife explains some of her lingering commitment to alcohol after she stopped drinking.

I went on to argue that my informants became hybridized with alcohol. The tool became a prosthetic. In this prostheticized state, alcohol stopped working for their ethical projects to be a kind of person, and instead became a tool for being towards death. My informants violated ideals for personhood in the US centered upon self-control, responsibility, and rationality. They could not form the familial, social, legal, or economic kinds of relationships valued by Americans. This dissertation examines the myriad ways that Americans ethically problematize their behavior. This includes models of health and risk, but other ethical considerations as well. For instance, it was about authenticity, of having their inner selves match their outer, as in Chris and Alan's case. For them, sobriety was about learning to be openly gay. Deborah said she was tired of lying to herself, her employers, her friends, and her family. Gabriel wanted to be a better husband and father. Their troubles, and their reflection on their troubles, generated a mood, usually intense fear, shame, or regret. In these moods, my informants were disinclined to engage with alcohol. If these moods perdured, the likelihood that not drinking as a possibility would become an actuality increased. In these moods, drinking versus non-drinking were reconceptualized, and so the choice between the two expanded to choices between forms of ethical conduct. For example, both Evelyn and Gabriel associated drinking with delusional, unclear thinking and sobriety with clear thinking. They could choose to be delusional or choose to be clear thinkers.

When my informants stopped completely, they went through an existential crisis. Alcohol having been taken away, the basis of their way of being was called into question. In answer to their existential crises, they used Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and other cultural resources to build a new basis for being-in-the-world. Their transformations did not consist of "burning bush" moments, but performing quotidian actions under different ethical descriptions. They enacted behaviors that signified virtues, such as honesty and humility, and avoided those that signified vices, such as dishonesty and self-will. This involved the minutiae of everyday life. In Rebecca's case, making her bed, taking a shower, and eating breakfast were essential for becoming a responsible person. The process of self-transformation is material and intersubjective. It was how they talked to people, ate food, drove their car, and treated their belongings. Just as the seemingly functional aspects of drinking were entwined with projects to become a kind of person, so too were the mundane transformations they made to their everyday habits.

To perform transformative operations on themselves, my informants needed to learn which of their thoughts, feelings, and actions are a problem, and what they should be thinking, feeling, and doing instead. To learn this, they had to first learn a central practice of sobriety: truth-telling. They told the truth within interactions with their sponsors and other alcoholics. Truth-telling took place within nested sets of replication at different scales. The interactions were partial replicas of historical speech genres such as classical Greek practices of *parrhesia*, or frank speech, confession, American evangelical witnessing, and psychotherapy. Alcoholics tend to choose as their sponsor people who are replicas of a past self, which lends them authority in their evaluations, and who are replicas of a desired future self.

In our society, there are roughly two ways to deal with the truth. The first is epistemological: how do you know what you know is true? My informants were not concerned with that. They were concerned with the other aspect of truth: truth as activity, as truth-telling and truthful behavior. They were concerned about the importance of the truth and its effects on people. Truth was constituted intersubjectively through talk, by people in a shared world, and shaped by American language ideologies having to do with sincerity, intention, and inner reference. Within these interactions, my informants learned what counts as virtues or vices. They did not learn rules and norms. Rather than applying general maxims, my informants learned a mode of moral reasoning that establishes relations of likeness between their day-to-day actions and examples of virtues or vices given by other alcoholics. If a sponsor describes a sponsee's behavior as dishonest, she shares experiences in which she and others were dishonest. She would also consider context: to whom the act or utterance was directed, what were the motives, when and where this occurred. These truth-telling interactions also established a mood which influenced either receptivity to or rejection of novel significations, such as what counts as dishonest behavior, and influenced the willingness to enact novel behaviors.

Within these interactions, they objectified physical sensations, thoughts, and actions. They glossed these as "character defects" such as resentment and fear; I refer to them as vices. They developed the habit of self-monitoring for them. They also learned to disengage from their absorbed engagement with the world and observe themselves. Maggie called this being a movie camera. By talking with other alcoholics, they are introduced to novel virtuous ways to act in a given situation. Being a movie camera gives them space to act differently than they habitually do. As enactment of re-signified actions accumulated, their habits transformed.

The final sobriety practice I examined was how people rescaled experiences of their minds. My analysis was inspired by Gregory Bateson's concept of mind as immanent in circuits that include brain, body, and the environment. When my informants were distressed, they experienced their minds as "big." Bigness could be a multitude of mental objects – memories, thoughts, perceptions – rapidly generating connections with other mental objects. It could be an overwhelming plenitude of mental objects and things in their environment to engage with. They exploited the materiality of hand and arm muscles, paper and pen, to make their minds "small." What they did was create material circuits out of, for instance, themselves, their sponsor, a sheet of paper, a pen, and their hand muscles. Semiotic operations within this circuit make their experience of their minds manageable or give them access to what they conceive of as preexisting mental objects such as a memory.

Analyzing the processes of addiction and recovery, which I frame as a transformation in ethical being-in-the-world, sheds light on issues of interest beyond that field. I explored how ethical concerns are entwined in physical conditions, and looked at the ways that contemporary Americans engage in self-making. Their transformations are not encompassed by concepts like biopower. Their transformation is enchanted. It involves God or other suprahuman agents and forces. The purpose is not to create capitalist or neoliberal subjects. They are virtuous for the sake of being virtuous; it is an end in itself. You are not honest because it gets you ahead. You are honest because that is what good people do. Their practices include a bricolage of ideologies of personhood from different eras. Salvation is found outside the self. A community of people directs their self-making. They must subordinate their will to a Higher Power. They are asked to downplay rational faculties. They seek authenticity. Recovery as how my informants experienced it was irreducibly plural in its ideologies and practices. An analysis of their transformation addresses the question, How do people know what to do in order to change their lives? Their process was neither orderly nor regimented. Greg said he was frustrated to discover there was no formula for recovery, that it was not like solving a mathematical equation. None of my informants achieved sobriety by following rules.

My informants' experiences complicates the notions of autonomy and freedom as constitutive of moral agency. Both while drinking and reforming their habits, they acted as distributed agents. They used alcohol as a tool as a means for constructing their subjectivity, and then became hybridized with alcohol. In recovery, they removed alcohol as a prosthetic, so to

speak, and became co-agents with God and other people. This facilitated self-distancing from habitual thoughts, feelings, and actions as well as their habitual disposition to interpret signs in particular ways. The involvement of other agents introduced options to act differently. Finally, the notion of choice matters to many Americans when it comes to evaluating people as moral agents. I undertook this project in the hopes of understanding alcoholism and recovery in a way that does justice to my informants as moral agents. Within all the experiences that I presented, I wanted to call attention to the density of the connections between mental processes, molecules, bodies, things, other people, and social categories of persons – that dense network must be transformed, and the habits of signification within them. To untangle those connections, imagine new connections, resignify both those sets of connections, and then make new connections: this is too complex a process to be reducible to one kind of activity, choice, by one type of actor, an autonomous individual. The process consists of an array of precise techniques carried out as collective, sustained labor. If an individual is approached as a nexus of the aforementioned connections, and actions are carried out within circuits that extend beyond the individual, then the concept of freedom needs to be rethought.

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