

Sobering Wisdom

**PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATIONS
OF TWELVE STEP SPIRITUALITY**

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Powerlessness and Responsibility in Twelve Step Narratives

Most of us recognize that addiction saps freedom. But we also tend to think that someone saddled with an addiction should and can do something about it. Ever since Aristotle and the ancient Greeks first examined “weakness of will,” philosophers have grappled with this dilemma. The very first of the Twelve Steps raises the issue, and our next two essays address it from two quite different perspectives. The Australian philosopher Mary Jean Walker begins by describing the conundrum and then assesses some of the ways commonly used to try to get past it. Eschewing these, she argues that the narrative theory of identity developed by the contemporary philosopher Paul Ricoeur enables us to resolve the dilemma. The fact that Twelve Step practitioners tend to love telling stories gives great credibility to this provocative proposal.

The literature of Twelve Step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous contains apparently contradictory implications regarding powerlessness and personal responsibility. In this essay I examine the treatment of these concepts in Twelve Step literature and their implications for the self-conception of people in these programs. In the first section, I examine the literature to demonstrate that addicts are presented as powerless over, yet responsible for, their addictive behaviors. In the second section, I outline two potential ways people in Twelve Step programs might reconcile this contradiction within their self-conception, but I argue that neither is satisfactory. In the third section, I draw on Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity to develop an account of how someone in a Twelve Step group could coherently understand herself as both powerless and responsible.

Powerlessness and Responsibility

Admitting one's powerlessness is the First Step in Twelve Step programs. In explaining this Step, Twelve Step literature presents the addict as having been taken over by a substance or a compulsion: "Alcohol . . . bleeds us of all self-sufficiency and all will to resist its demands."¹ Powerlessness is described as the result of a condition of both the mind and the body: "We were the victims of a mental obsession[;] . . . first we were smitten by an insane urge that condemned us to go on drinking, and then by an allergy of the body that insured we would destroy ourselves in the process."²

Steps Two and Three further confirm addicts' powerlessness by having them accept that outside help is necessary for them to change their behavior, and decide to "turn over" their will. These Steps are presented as a means of attaining humility and overcoming egotism, an antidote to the arrogance that is associated with addiction. Addicts are typically "defiant" and need to replace such defiance with "reliance," or replace doomed attempts at independence with an acceptance of dependence.³ Attempts at independence are criticized as attempts to play God (a project typical of addicts), while "dependence, as A.A. practices it, is really a means of gaining true independence of the spirit."⁴ The positive sense of dependence is explained by comparisons to our dependence on electricity and modern medicine: these too enable other kinds of independence.

The recognition of powerlessness is emphatically presented as necessary for recovery: "Admissions of personal powerlessness turn out to be the firm bedrock upon which happy and purposeful lives may be built."⁵ Sobriety or recovery will be precarious if the addict does not recognize his or her powerlessness—but admitting powerlessness enables a new sense of empowerment to emerge.

However, there is a different and apparently contradictory line of thought in Twelve Step literature, which places strong emphasis on responsibility. This line of thought is evident in the diagnostic statements linking alcoholism to various negative character traits and tendencies, and is continued in later Steps. In Step Four, addicts are to take an inventory of their past wrongdoings and character flaws.⁶ The literature explains the purpose of this Step by presenting these moral, emotional, and spiritual deficiencies as driving their addictive behavior. Thus, only by remedying these can they recover.⁷ Step Five directs addicts to share the results of this inventory with another person, in order to correct their tendencies to be overly harsh or lenient in self-examination.⁸

Steps Six and Seven focus on identifying and removing defects of character. Steps Eight and Nine involve identifying, then making amends to, people the addict has harmed. Steps Ten through Twelve ask the addict to engage in ongoing processes of moral self-assessment and spiritual development, and to help other addicts.⁹

This moral content implies that addicts are responsible for their past actions. In identifying, confessing to, and then making amends for their actions, addicts come to recognize their responsibility for those actions. And such recognition is presented as necessary for addicts to recover.

Thus, addicts in Twelve Step programs are told that they are powerless over some actions and that they are responsible for those actions.¹⁰ Both ideas are presented as not only true but *useful*, or therapeutic. Since people in Twelve Step groups may feel guilty or remorseful about their behavior, believing one is powerless can help by providing relief. Fingarette has argued that the guilt experienced by addicts is likely to obscure good self-understanding because, in order to escape it, addicts may engage in self-deception, convincing themselves that their behavior is not problematic and hence making it more likely that they will continue it.¹¹ So temporarily suspending feelings of guilt by admitting powerlessness may help addicts acknowledge a need to change. Fingarette's point also indicates the purpose of the belief in responsibility. Many people in Twelve Step programs are likely to have evaluated their addictive behavior negatively—even if they have also deceived themselves about it by blaming others or dismissing problems related to that behavior as bad luck.¹² Accepting responsibility for the behavior, when added to this negative evaluation of it, provides a reason to alter it. While belief in one's powerlessness on its own could become an excuse for continuing the addictive behavior, accepting responsibility prevents this.¹³

Thus, either belief on its own could end up contributing to continuation of the addictive behavior: powerlessness without responsibility could be used as an excuse, while responsibility without powerlessness could encourage self-deception. Both are needed in order for either belief to have its therapeutic value.

Reconciling Powerlessness and Responsibility

The problem, of course, is that, according to most philosophical as well as commonsense notions of responsibility, actions for which we are responsible

must be freely performed, while actions over which we are powerless are not freely performed, and so we are not responsible for them.¹⁴ I will now discuss two ways addicts could make sense of these beliefs that are suggested by empirical sources. Neither method, I argue, satisfactorily accounts for the presentation of these ideas in the AA literature. But they are instructive for identifying what sort of account is required to make sense of this literature.

First, people might make distinctions about degrees or kinds of responsibility, or factors that mitigate responsibility, in such a way that the beliefs are not in conflict. This approach might draw on the idea, for instance, that while it was possible for addicts to have acted differently, it is understandable that they did not, given that they had an illness that predisposed them toward certain actions. Such a view may be consistent with our usual thinking about how coercion or incapacity can mitigate responsibility. Or it may be consistent with philosophical approaches that distinguish between different senses of responsibility. Drawing on a view developed by Gary Watson, for example, we might distinguish responsibility as “attributability” from responsibility as “accountability.” We “attribute” an action to someone when we recognize that she performed it. We hold her accountable for it when we regard punishing her, or at least disapproving of her, to be justified.¹⁵ Perhaps addicts are responsible in one sense but not in the other: their actions are attributable to them, but their powerlessness blocks responsibility in the accountability sense. Some such approach might make sense of some of the ways recovering addicts speak. For instance, some Twelve Step program attendees reportedly make a distinction between responsibility and blameworthiness.¹⁶ Alice King, describing her acceptance of being an alcoholic, states that it “was not my fault, but it was my responsibility.”¹⁷

Any solution that involves distinctions about degrees of responsibility, however, would be at odds with the way that powerlessness and responsibility are discussed in AA literature. Alcoholics in AA are taught they are powerless and that they need to take responsibility; no limitations are placed on either idea. Any way of understanding how powerlessness and responsibility can be simultaneously self-attributed needs to account for this absoluteness.

Distinctions about *kinds* of responsibility are also problematic. For instance, if addicts thought themselves responsible in an attributability sense, but not an accountability sense, this would mean they are not responsible in a sense that is robust enough to license others to respond in the ways they usually do in holding someone responsible. Nor is attributability sufficiently

robust to justify the actions that are recommended in the Twelve Step literature, such as confessing and making amends. And it is difficult to see how a sense of responsibility robust enough to justify confession and amendment would not be at odds with the belief in powerlessness.

A second possibility arises from reports that people in Twelve Step groups engage in talk of different selves. Some speak of an “addictive” self and another, more authentic self.¹⁸ This enables descriptions of inner conflict involving an “inner addict” who wants to continue the behavior in opposition to the desires or values of the more authentic self. Engaging in such talk could provide addicts a way to experience desires to drink as “not really their own,” but as a symptom of their illness, and a way to acknowledge past addictive behaviors while believing that these behaviors were not expressive of their “real” self.

Such talk may initially seem to offer a solution: perhaps powerlessness could attach to one of these selves and responsibility to the other. This talk is also suggestive in light of philosophical approaches that consider responsibility to attach to those actions that are “one’s own”—that is, actions that express the agent’s self, character, rational judgments, or evaluative commitments. “Self-disclosure” theories of responsibility propose that we are responsible for actions that are expressive of our identities in these senses, although not for actions that are “not our own” (such as reflex or accidental actions).¹⁹

Again, however, this does not do justice to the Twelve Step literature, which attributes both powerlessness and responsibility directly to the addict. Consider: If the addictive self is the one to whom the addictive traits belong, then only the addictive self, not the authentic self, is responsible for them. But the addictive self is powerless, and so cannot be responsible either. That is, this way of thinking confirms addicts’ powerlessness to the extent of saying that certain actions are not even part of their identity. But for responsibility to be applicable, ownership of action is required. Further, it is hard to see how it can be therapeutically valuable for the addict to speak of her powerlessness and responsibility if she attributes them only to her less authentic self. Thus, any reconciliation of powerlessness and responsibility needs to account for how addicts could “own” their addictive behaviors, while also regarding themselves as powerless over them.

Appropriating Responsibility

So far we have assumed that considering oneself powerless over, yet responsible for, the same actions involves a contradiction. This assumption relies on the premise that one is only responsible for actions that are freely performed. While this is not contentious on many philosophical and commonsense notions of responsibility, it can be disputed.²⁰ In this section I draw on Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity to explain how it is possible to "take" responsibility by appropriating certain actions as one's own, irrespective of whether or not they were freely undertaken.

The motivation to examine narrative identity in relation to Twelve Step groups comes from noting that their practices involve constant use of personal narratives. They are used in bringing people into the program, describing progress, and making sense of experiences of addiction and recovery. The constant exchange of personal stories within Twelve Step group practices provides templates for self-understanding to members, so that throughout their recovery they may reinterpret themselves and their lives using Twelve Step concepts.²¹

Ricoeur argues that because narrative is the imitation of action, we can articulate our lives using narrative form.²² A life, like a narrative, takes place over time and contains a sequence of events. Constructing a narrative out of a sequence of events involves connecting them together in ways that enable us to make sense of them in light of each other, so that the narrative as a whole provides a context in which particular events are intelligible. In a similar sense, persons interpret their own lives within self-narratives that make their lives intelligible to them.

A criticism of this approach to identity is that lives are much messier than narratives. Any life will contain disruptions and inconsistencies. Events that are out of one's control or that have nothing to do with one's own "story" will inevitably play a large role in one's life. Ricoeur responds to this point by developing an account of the unifying capacity of narrative. Narrative, he argues, has the capacity to unify discordant events into a whole, combining diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability into unities. It achieves this through what Ricoeur calls "emplotment."²³

Emplotment is the arrangement of actions and events into a plot. Arranging events into a narrative form involves interpreting them, since a bare

recounting of events would not make them intelligible.²⁴ For intelligibility, we need to connect events to each other in some way. This involves picking out which events are relevant to the narrative, what their relevance is, and how they connect to other events. In the process of emplotment, then, we interpret our lives in certain ways, giving individual events meaning.

Emplotment is a means of unifying diverse elements, because narrative is able to present these elements as parts of a whole—the narrative itself. Emplotment thus “configures” different events into a narrative unity.²⁵ For this reason Ricoeur calls narration a “synthesis of the heterogeneous.”²⁶ In the same way, in interpreting ourselves and our lives narratively, we connect diverse events together as a unity, making sense of ourselves as wholes.

Notice that the personal unity that narrative self-interpretation confers does not depend on our having any actual consistency or continuity in our lives, character, or values. Rather, it depends on our self-interpretative practices: in seeking to understand ourselves, we actively synthesize heterogeneous elements by seeking to make them intelligible in light of each other. Chance events, or discordances, are configured into parts of our narratives in virtue of our activity in interpreting them in light of other events in our lives.²⁷

This implies that events over which we have no control can nonetheless become part of our identity. As an example, consider Genevieve Lloyd’s discussion of Spinoza’s expulsion from the Jewish community. Lloyd explains that although the expulsion “shattered the external forms that had hitherto given his life meaning,” Spinoza embraced the change as one that gave “greater clarity to the directions of the life he was already leading,” and thereby “reshaped his life and identity in a direction that was by no means alien to him.”²⁸ That is, he incorporated the expulsion into his self-interpretation, taking it to express elements of his identity, even though it was no action of his own. By appropriating this necessity, Spinoza transforms an external event into something that makes sense in light of other events in his narrative, and in turn contributes to the intelligibility of other events in his life. By emplotting the event, two very different aspects of his life—orthodox Judaism and beliefs that directly conflicted with it—become part of a whole, different parts of one narrative.

If we can actively appropriate chance events into our identity by interpreting them in terms of their role in our narrative, we could also actively appropriate actions over which we think of ourselves as powerless. Rather than being responsible only for free actions, we may assume responsibility for some

action because we recognize that it plays a role in our identity: it is something that makes sense in light of other events in our narrative, and it contributes to the context that makes other events intelligible. This involves not just a recognition of responsibility for some actions, but active self-interpretation that configures those actions into part of one's story. Appropriating responsibility through the actions recommended by the Twelve Steps—careful moral inventories, apologizing, and making amends—is part of making the past behaviors part of one's story, part of oneself.

Although this may not be consistent with our intuitions about freedom and responsibility, it is consistent with our intuitions about *identity* and responsibility: we are responsible for those actions that are our own.

As an example, consider an alcoholic who has neglected her family while drinking. As a participant in a Twelve Step program who is trying to cease this behavior, she comes to believe she was powerless over it. She admits her powerlessness and then reconfirms it by seeking the help of a power outside herself and attempting to turn her will over to it. She finds this view a relief, and it helps to prevent her from falling into her usual pattern of self-recrimination, followed by further drinking. But she also expresses her belief in her responsibility for the neglect by listing it when she undertakes Step Four, and by apologizing and endeavoring to make amends to her family when doing Steps Eight and Nine. This appropriation of responsibility helps motivate different future behavior.

In the view developed here, this would involve regarding her addictive behavior as expressive of her identity, even though she had no power over it.²⁹ This self-interpretation reconfigures the addiction so that it is no longer only an outside force that takes over her but also something that forms part of, and plays a role within, her life story. Note that this does not mean the addiction is no longer an outside force over which she had no control. If this were so, it would diminish the point of the admission of powerlessness, and in any case it would not be consistent with the literature. Rather, she has brought the addiction into her narrative through the behaviors suggested in the Twelve Steps and is interpreting its role—and the role of enacting a Twelve Step program—in her life. Although powerless over the addictive behaviors, she is nonetheless responsible for the behavior (and for that powerlessness) because it is hers.³⁰

This explanation thus makes sense of the features of the literature that were not accounted for in the ideas explored in the second section. It does not rely

on distinctions about kinds or degrees of responsibility, because it involves free appropriation, not just recognition, of responsibility. And it enables both powerlessness and responsibility to be attributed to one agent with a unified identity that incorporates disparate elements.

A Final Note on Freedom

Thus, the narrative conception of identity offered by Ricoeur can explain how an addict could accept both powerlessness and responsibility in a way that does justice to the Twelve Step literature. People may freely choose to appropriate responsibility for actions even if they also take themselves to have been powerless over those actions.

While I cannot explore the implications of this discussion for questions about freedom and responsibility more generally here, the discussion does connect Twelve Step thought to certain nonstandard ways of thinking about freedom and autonomy. Lloyd argues that the notion of freedom implicated in her discussion of Spinoza, and in Spinoza's own philosophical thought, is opposed to the Cartesian notion of freedom that identifies it with the will and opposes it to necessity.³¹ Spinoza denied the possibility of free will in the Cartesian sense because he regarded the human will as subject to the same necessities as the rest of the natural world. But he presents an alternative, Stoic conception of freedom: we are free when our actions result from our own nature, even though our nature is a necessity for us.³² And there is a sense in which this is precisely what people in Twelve Step programs learn to do: to understand how both their addictive behavior and their need to remain abstinent are reactions to their own "nature," their identity as addicts. They may thus regard being an alcoholic as a necessity but nonetheless freely appropriate this aspect of their identity, and as such appropriate responsibility for it.³³

NOTES

1. Alcoholics Anonymous Australia, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 21.

2. *Ibid.*, 22.

3. *Ibid.*, 27–31, 35–36.

4. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

5. *Ibid.*, 21.

6. *Ibid.*, 48.

7. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

8. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

9. *Ibid.*, 6–8.

10. For more general discussion of addiction and responsibility, see, e.g., Stephen Morse, “Hooked on Hype: Addiction and Responsibility,” *Law and Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (2000): 3–49; Michael Corrado, “Addiction and Responsibility: An Introduction,” *Law and Philosophy* 18, no. 6 (1999): 579–88; and the papers in *Addiction and Responsibility*, edited by Poland and Graham.

11. Fingarette, “Alcoholism and Self-Deception.” See also Mary Jean Walker, “Addiction and Self-Deception: A Method for Self-Control?,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2010): 305–19.

12. Autobiographical accounts in *Alcoholics Anonymous* often note such strategies (e.g., 275, 333, 479, 515), and they sometimes present failure to take responsibility as part of what was wrong with their authors’ drinking.

13. See Neil Levy, “Self-Deception and Responsibility for Addiction,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2003): 133–42, and Peele, *Diseasing of America*.

14. There are other senses in which the AA literature implies that alcoholics have free will. Step Three describes turning over the will as a decision, implying that alcoholics do this freely. My thanks to the editors for this point.

15. Gary Watson, “Two Faces of Responsibility,” *Philosophical Topics* 24, no. 2 (1996): 227–48. See also Angela Smith, “Control, Responsibility, and Moral Assessment,” *Philosophical Studies* 138, no. 3 (2008): 367–92; and Coleen Macnamara, “Holding Others Responsible,” *Philosophical Studies* 152 (2011): 81–102. Watson’s view is somewhat more complex in its details than discussed here, though the “self-disclosure” view he develops it to defend is discussed further below. Self-disclosure approaches typically distinguish between *judgments* of responsibility and our *practices* of holding responsible, which involve having certain reactive attitudes and treating the person accordingly. The distinction is drawn from Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25. A perhaps similar distinction is used by Francis Seeburger (*Addiction and Responsibility*, 175–89), who links recovery to taking responsibility by drawing on a distinction between “reacting” and “responding.” I take Seeburger’s position to be consistent with my discussion below, though his descriptions of “responding” and its link to responsibility are phenomenological and do not provide a conceptual explanation of this link.

16. Diamond, *Narrative Means to Sober Ends*, 106.

17. King, *High Sobriety*, 269.

18. Michael Larkin and Mark Griffiths, “Experience of Addiction and Recovery: The Case for Subjective Accounts,” *Addiction Research and Theory* 10, no. 3 (2002): 303; Diamond, *Narrative Means to Sober Ends*, 120–23. On narratives about finding a true self

in recovery from addiction, see Mariana Valverde, "Experience and Truth-telling: Intoxicated Autobiography and Ethical Subjectivity," *Outlines* 4, no. 1 (2002): 3–18.

19. Watson, "Two Faces"; Smith, "Control."

20. Self-disclosure approaches allow that we may be responsible for actions that are nonvoluntary (i.e., not deliberately chosen or consciously controlled, such as acts of omission, or having certain attitudes as a result of failing to reflect), though not for actions that are *involuntary* (which would not be connected in the right way to our identities for responsibility to be applicable). The view developed below is close to self-disclosure views, though I argue that what occurs in Twelve Step programs is better understood as an appropriation rather than a recognition of responsibility.

21. See Carole Cain, "Personal Stories: Self-Understanding and Identity Acquisition in Alcoholics Anonymous," *Ethos* 19, no. 2 (1991): 210–52; Maria Gabrielle Swora, "The Rhetoric of Transformation in the Healing of Alcoholism: The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 7, no. 3 (2004): 187–209; and Nancy Potter, "Grounding for Understanding Self-Injury as Addiction or (Bad) Habit," in Poland and Graham, *Addiction and Responsibility*, 201–24.

22. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 157.

23. Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative."

24. Ricoeur, "Narrated Time," *Philosophy Today* 29, no. 4 (1985): 259–72.

25. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 142–43.

26. *Ibid.*, 141.

27. Ricoeur, "Life in Quest," 21–22.

28. Lloyd, "Shaping a Life," in Mackenzie and Atkins, *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, 257.

29. That AA members do come to view alcoholism as central to their identity is well established in anthropological and sociological studies (e.g., Denzin, *Recovering Alcoholic*, and Jensen, *Storytelling*).

30. Some may worry that this picture would still involve a sense of responsibility that is not robust enough to make sense of actions like apologizing and making amends. I regard these actions themselves as a way of freely appropriating a more robust sense of responsibility via active self-interpretation, and hence consider this worry unfounded. In *taking* responsibility by apologizing and making amends, Twelve Step participants alter how they regard their past actions and characteristics and the sense in which they consider them "their own." Thus the practice differs from either making judgments about responsibility, or responding to such judgments, which have been the focus of discussions within the moral responsibility literature. Indeed, this literature has focused on holding *others* responsible, rather than the role of responsibility evaluations in our self-conceptions. I do not have space to further discuss how this idea would sit within the literature on moral responsibility, but my view would align with self-disclosure views of responsibility, so

that this worry is a version of the view that self-disclosure theories of responsibility are not robust enough to license our practices of holding others responsible. For an argument in favor of this view, see Wolf, *Freedom within Reason*; for responses, see Watson, "Two Faces," and Smith, "Control."

31. Lloyd, "Shaping a Life," 257–58.

32. For instance, the modern individualist notion of autonomy (which has Cartesian underpinnings, and in which freedom is closely connected to control) has been critiqued for its inability to account for the many ways in which our autonomy depends on others. There are alternate ways of conceptualizing autonomy that resonate with the AA literature by making it compatible with dependence (see, for example, essays in Mackenzie and Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy*). Ernest Kurtz's discussion of AA's place in intellectual history (*Not-God*, 175–79) is also suggestive of the need to reconceptualize autonomy in approaching AA thought, though he appears to retain the assumption that autonomy is necessarily opposed to necessity. Further exploration of what notion of autonomy would best fit with AA thought might interestingly draw further on Spinoza's neo-Stoic approach.

33. I would like to thank the volume's editors, Jerome Miller and Nick Plants, for their helpful comments on several versions of the essay.