

A Critique of “We Agnostics”

Chapter 4 of *Alcoholic Anonymous*

by Paul W.

“Challenge a person’s beliefs and you challenge his dignity, standing, and power.”

– Steven Pinker

This paper is solely the opinion of the author because no one person speaks for or claims to speak for all atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists, etc. This critique is offered as a view of how at least one atheist reacts to the Chapter, “We Agnostics” in *Alcoholics Anonymous* which apparently is intended to speak for agnostics and atheists. It does not speak for me.

Admittedly there are times when I slip out of intellectual critique and unintentionally into ad hominem mode, even though I do not intend to do so. This demonstrates the depth and strength of my feelings in reaction to this chapter. For this I apologize but leave the remarks intact for the reader’s edification.

This paper *is* an invitation (1) to be read and considered as an atheist’s considered reaction to the chapter after almost three decades of sobriety in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, (2) to consider that it might reflect the view of other atheists and agnostics, and (3) to enter into an academic style of dialogue on the critiques presented herein.

Definitions and Disclosures

The following definitions, from the eleventh edition of *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, are used in this critique. They are not necessarily the ones William (Bill) Wilson had in mind when he wrote “We Agnostics” or any other of his works. One can only guess at his definitions from his writings.

Critique. A critical examination or discussion.

Agnostic. A person who holds the view that any ultimate reality (as God) is unknown and probably unknowable: One who is not committed to believing in either the existence or the nonexistence of God or a god.

Atheist. One who believes there is no deity.

Deity. The rank or essential nature of a god; God, Supreme Being.

Notice that “atheist” is *not* defined as one who asserts to be able to prove there is no God. This is a popular definition often asserted to place someone in the position of trying to prove a negative. In situations of proof the responsibility is on the one making the claim. Atheists generally make no claim of nonexistence of God. Atheists simply find all proofs of God’s existence to be unsatisfactory or non-proofs. For example, the “First Cause” argument which reads:

1. Everything has a cause.
2. There must be a first cause.
3. That cause is God.

This was once a popular argument and convinced many people, especially children. However, the argument falls apart in many ways. If everything has a cause, there cannot be a first cause, *i.e.* what

caused the first cause? Also, if there is a first cause, what makes that cause something called “God” rather than some other first cause?

In this critique, the expression “atheists and agnostics” is often used for convenience and to best relate to Bill Wilson’s usage in “We Agnostics.” When done so it is intended to include the wide variety of nonbelievers: atheist, agnostic, freethinker, humanist, ethicist, secularist, and many more such titles.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I am an atheist as defined above. Like many other atheists (and agnostics) I know, I *would* believe or accept the existence of a being worthy of the title “God” should I be provided with satisfactory proof. All proofs which have been presented to me thus far have failed.

Why a Critique?

This critique is presented primarily because this chapter is inaccurate and misleading. Many theists in AA think or assert that this chapter should be sufficient to satisfy any objection that nonbelievers have concerning the emphasis on God in AA and an expressed need for recognition of agnostics and atheists who are successfully sober in AA.

“We Agnostics” leads to the erroneous conclusion that all atheists and agnostics need to seek God and to come to belief in some God in order to achieve sobriety.

The chapter does not directly recognize and address agnostics and atheists who are comfortable with and committed to sobriety *without* God. Based on Bill Wilson’s title of the chapter, his wording in the chapter, and in other writings, especially *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* it is easily argued that Bill Wilson believed that atheists did not exist but were at best agnostics. Quite frankly, the chapter is insulting to sincere agnostics and atheists. (Yes, there are many sincere atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, etc., in the world *and* many in Alcoholics Anonymous.)

“We Agnostics” is another demonstration of fear of atheists and agnostics by many, if not most, theists. The need to demean atheists and agnostics is widely demonstrated; as evidence, consider the general hatred of atheists disclosed by a recent Pew Report, the popular equating of atheists to evilness and to devil worship, and the widely claimed death bed conversions of notable nonbelievers. The Mt. Rainer AA Group “Minority Opinion” (which affected a General Service Conference) and the anonymous “White Paper” are further examples, especially in their vitriolic commentary about atheists and agnostics. Far too many theist AA members seem unable to accept the serious doubt and committed acceptance of no-God of atheist and agnostic members.

It is no wonder that most theistic members of Alcoholics Anonymous have no idea how to welcome and deal with newcomers who are nonbelievers or are in the process of struggling with “the God thing.” Hatred (to various degrees), fear, or lack of understanding lead many theist members to driving nonbelieving alcoholics away – possibly to their alcoholic deaths. Because Bill Wilson apparently said so, theistic members try to welcome nonbelievers or “God-struggling” people by stating, “Keep coming, have an open mind, be willing to believe, and you will be alright.” In short, “stick around and you will ‘Come to Believe.’” This one-sided view is counterproductive in that it is insulting, off-putting, and demonstrative of ignorance about sincere nonbelief. Why not just tell the nonbelievers to translate “God” to some greater power such as the group of sober alcoholics which surrounds them at every meeting?

Introductory Critique

I am committing heresy. I am critiquing Bill Wilson's own words, yes Bill's words, his sacred words. I am critiquing part of the first 164 pages of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the unchangeable "Big Book" – the "bible" of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Were this just a few hundred years ago I could be facing excommunication, torture, and burning at the stake. Today I simply face being ostracized – AA's form of excommunication.

The chapter, "We Agnostics" appears in the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (aka the "Big Book") on pages 44 through 57 and is thus part of that book which has been deemed unchangeable by the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Big Book is often referred to the "AA's bible" and is frequently called a "Gift from God" by members. This critique does not accept the inerrant nature of the chapter in question nor the first 164 pages of *Alcoholics Anonymous* itself.

The author of this chapter is William Wilson, best known as Bill W. He has come to be considered in all but name, a saint by a large number of members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Mr. Wilson's words are accepted by such members as the final, inerrant thoughts and pronouncements on the subject under discussion, except where one quotes him in contradiction to the "Big Book" or the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. The expression, "Bill's words" is heard many times to set-up a final argument on an issue.

As the author of "We Agnostics," Bill clearly sets himself up as speaking for all nonbelievers, for all atheists, agnostics, etc., in Alcoholics Anonymous. I hold that the chapter should, at the very least, have been titled, "This Agnostic's Story" or "We Few Agnostics." It is Bill's view and not that of a collection of atheists and agnostics in the early years of Alcoholics Anonymous. This was written over 70 years ago. During that time many nontheistic persons have come to Alcoholics Anonymous. Some have come to believe in a God of some sort. Some have remained atheists or agnostics as members in AA – most, I suspect, being anonymous about their belief that there is no deity, no God. Because of rejection others have left to form their own versions of AA. And, unfortunately, some have gone back to drinking and to death.

A careful reading of "We Agnostics" makes it clear that Jim B. and Hank C. – atheists in the early New York 100 – did not influence Bill in writing this chapter. Their influence in revising the Twelve Steps to soften the "God thing" is evident. The words, "as we understood Him" were added to Steps Three and Eleven. "God" was replaced with "a Power greater than ourselves" in Step Two. "On our knees" was deleted from Step Seven. Arguably their input would have changed the tone of "We Agnostics" had they been consulted and had Bill listened. Jim B. (Ed of Tradition Three) got AA started in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and San Diego. He was an atheist and remained so throughout his life. It is hard to imagine "We Agnostics" being published in its current form and tone had Hank C. and/or Jim B. had a say.

That Bill Wilson was an egotist is undeniable. His egotism may have begun when, as a child, it was pointed out that Australians were the only people able to make a boomerang. Young Bill Wilson worked hard and successfully made a boomerang – from the headboard of his bed. When Bill successfully demonstrated it, his grandfather observed, "Our Willie, the very first American to do it. The number one man." From then on Bill had to be the "number one man."

Bill also would not allow his wife, Lois Wilson, to write chapter 8, "To Wives." Lois' upset notwithstanding, Bill wrote that chapter himself. Bill's justification was one of maintaining

consistence of style in the writing. A suspicious reason at best, since Bill had ample opportunity to maintain style in final editing.

Clearly Bill's personal experience in having a deeply felt spiritual awakening highly influenced the tone and content of "We Agnostics." His desire for all recovering alcoholics to have such an experience is evident in his writings. Step Twelve's indication of passage to an evangelical life following a spiritual awakening is undeniable evidence.

Bill did not, or could not, fully accept the presence of successfully sober atheists and agnostics in Alcoholics Anonymous who did not need to come to a belief in a God of any understanding.

This chapter alone can be and has been used as evidence that atheists and agnostics cannot be successfully sober in Alcoholics Anonymous. The 56 page polemic "A Minority Opinion" presented in opposition to *Advisory Action #17* of the 2010 General Service Conference calling for stories on spirituality *including* stories from atheists and agnostics who are successfully sober in Alcoholics Anonymous, makes this point. It goes on to assert that atheists and agnostics who claim to be sober in AA were never "real alcoholics" in the first place – thus they are ignorant heavy drinkers or simply liars. The anonymous 28 page "White Paper" makes the same points, going on to predict the ruin of AA by such despicable people as atheists and agnostics. Both are easily accessible on the internet. As stated in Tradition Ten, AA does not wish to engage in any controversy, so no commentary from AAWS is available. I have not found any response to the "White Paper."

Critique of the Chapter's Text

The following contains the text of "We Agnostics." Portions of the text have been underlined for emphasis and/or to assist the reader in connecting those portions to the following comments. The text of "We Agnostics" is taken from *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Fourth Edition, Seventeenth printing, March 2006, pages 44-57. The critical comments are in boxed italics.

In the preceding chapters you have learned something of alcoholism. We hope we have made clear the distinction between the alcoholic and the nonalcoholic. If, when you honestly want to, you find you cannot quit entirely, or if when drinking, you have little control over the amount you take, you are probably alcoholic. If that be the case, you may be suffering from an illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer.

These last six words make it clear that Bill believes only those who have a spiritual experience are able to conquer alcoholism. Since it is also clear that Bill's vision of "spiritual" is God-related, then no atheist or agnostic can ever gain control over alcohol. Yet his writings elsewhere, for example in Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, seem to indicate differently.

Ask yourself, why would an atheist or agnostic who is comfortable with his belief that there is no God read any further?

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

The “feels” would imply that one is not an atheist or agnostic but simply feels that he is. This is like telling a gay person that he only feels like he is gay but he really isn’t. I do not feel that I am an atheist, I know that I am. The standard “truth” is that you are an alcoholic or not. The last part – alcoholic death or spiritual life – is the first example of the logic error of “either or” thinking. It is currently one of the arguments creationists use to prove creation. If they can discredit the truth of evolution, then the only other choice is creation (by God).

But it isn't so difficult. About half our original fellowship were of exactly that type. At first some of us tried to avoid the issue, hoping against hope we were not true alcoholics. But after a while we had to face the fact that we must find a spiritual basis of life - or else. Perhaps it is going to be that way with you. But cheer up, something like half of us thought we were atheists or agnostics. Our experience shows that you need not be disconcerted.

I question, without proof, the “about half” statement. I know they are “Bill’s words” but I question them anyway. About half of the early members would be about 50 or half of the “first 100” so often referenced. The claim of “about half” may be intended to give added credence to what is presented here. This makes it even more critical that evidence supporting the claim of “about half” be provided. The comment, “thought we were” once again avoids those who knew they were. Hank and Jim B. are good examples. Again, Jim B. (Ed of Tradition Three) was an atheist – for all of his life.

If a mere code of morals or a better philosophy of life were sufficient to overcome alcoholism, many of us would have recovered long ago. But we found that such codes and philosophies did not save us, no matter how much we tried. We could wish to be moral, we could wish to be philosophically comforted, in fact, we could will these things with all our might, but the needed power wasn't there. Our human resources, as marshalled by the will, were not sufficient; they failed utterly.

No code of morals is a “mere code of morals.” One may argue that Alcoholics Anonymous’ Twelve Steps are a code of morals, especially Step Four, “Made a searching and moral inventory of ourselves.” These steps are introduced in the next chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous as a “suggested program of recovery [from alcoholism].”

Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a Power greater than ourselves. Obviously. But where and how were we to find this Power?

The concept of synergy was not something new when Bill wrote these words. Why did he not more clearly recognize the power of synergy? Why not acknowledge the power of a group being more than the sum of the power of each individual which has worked for centuries? Religions make use of it in regular gatherings of worshipers. Sports make use of it in exciting gatherings to cheer their team. Bill’s focus on a God and away from human power is evident in his capitalization of the “P” in power.

Well, that's exactly what this book is about. Its main object is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself which will solve your problem. That means we have written a book which we believe to be spiritual as well as moral. And *it means*, of course, that we are going to talk about God. Here difficulty arises with agnostics. Many times we talk to a new man and watch his hope rise as we discuss his alcoholic problems and explain our fellowship. But his face falls when we speak of spiritual matters, especially when we mention God, for we have re-opened a subject which our man thought he had neatly evaded or entirely ignored.

It is not that every atheist or agnostic has "neatly evaded or entirely ignored" the issue of God. That would be impossible in the United States as talk of God is everywhere. Those atheists and agnostics whom I know have confronted the issue of God and have come to the conclusion that there is no entity worthy of such a designation. All proofs offered for the existence of a God have not been convincing. Telling such a person that God can save him is counter-productive. The "problem with the God stuff" we hear so much about is not one of struggling with belief as it is about proselytizing, about converting someone to your set of beliefs. All religions have a god or gods. If AA is "spiritual not religious" why the emphasis on God? Or more accurately, gods – since each person is allowed to have his or her own god, as he or she understands him, just as long as it's male. (Bill always refers to "He" or "Him.")

We know how he feels. We have shared his honest doubt and prejudice. Some of us have been violently anti-religious. To others, the word "God" brought up a particular idea of Him with which someone had tried to impress them during childhood. Perhaps we rejected this particular conception because it seemed inadequate. With that rejection we imagined we had abandoned the God idea entirely. We were bothered with the thought that faith and dependence upon a Power beyond ourselves was somewhat weak, even cowardly. We looked upon this world of warring individuals, warring theological systems, and inexplicable calamity, with deep skepticism. We looked askance at many individuals who claimed to be godly. How could a Supreme Being have anything to do with it all? And who could comprehend a Supreme Being anyhow? Yet, in other moments, we found ourselves thinking, when enchanted by a starlit night, "Who, then, made all this?" There was a feeling of awe and wonder, but it was fleeting and soon lost.

"We know how he feels" – what has been your reaction when someone tells you, "I know how you feel?" If you are like everyone else I've asked this question over years of instructing empathic responding, your answer is something like, "The hell you do." If you have an idea about my feeling, describe how I feel. The assertion that you know how I feel has little worth. "Honest doubt and prejudice" – Now we finally have the admission that some may have honest doubt. There is no admission that many of us have honest belief that there is no God. But this small sop to honesty is followed quickly by accusation of prejudice which negates the honesty. "Imagined" – with this we are back to lack of reality, lack of clarity. No atheist or agnostic is given the credit for being clear and completely honest in his not believing in a God. We just imagine things. In this paragraph all are painted with the brush of seeing ourselves as "weak, even cowardly, when reflecting on a power beyond ourselves. The United States Marine Corps is strong on power greater than the individual Marine. Power is reliance on the man/woman to your right and to your left. Power beyond self is the squad, the platoon, the company, the Corps. I assure you that no Marine sees this as "weak, even cowardly."

"Who, then made all this?" The question should be "How did all this come about?" The sciences of cosmology, astronomy, and physics have answered this. For the person with a modicum of education in sciences there is no need for "Who." Finally, the statement that awe and wonder are "fleeting and soon lost" is not universal. Those feelings are present any time one looks at the stars and thinks about the fact that some have long since burned out or exploded and that some aren't stars but are other galaxies. And the discovery that we are made of "star stuff" – the make-up of our bodies is in the same proportions as the make-up of stars.

Yes, we of agnostic temperament have had these thoughts and experiences. Let us make haste to reassure you. We found that as soon as we were able to lay aside prejudice and express even a willingness to believe in a Power greater than ourselves, we commenced to get results, even though it was impossible for any of us to fully define or comprehend that Power, which is God.

What is temperament?" Is anyone of a theistic temperament? Or, of a Lutheran temperament? Once again those who are not theists are called upon to "lay aside prejudices" and to "express even a willingness to believe [in God]." How would AA members who are theists react if asked to lay aside their prejudice and express a willingness to believe/accept that there is no God? Is this not a fair quid pro quo? Is this not the open-mindedness called for in Step Two? I have yet to meet an atheist or agnostic who would not accept the existence of a God, if presented with sufficient proof. I have yet to meet a theist who would even entertain the question.

Much to our relief, we discovered we did not need to consider another's conception of God. Our own conception, however inadequate, was sufficient to make the approach and to effect a contact with Him. As soon as we admitted the possible existence of a Creative Intelligence, a Spirit of the Universe underlying the totality of things, we began to be possessed of a new sense of power and direction, provided we took other simple steps. We found that God does not make too hard terms with those who seek Him. To us, the Realm of Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive or forbidding to those who earnestly seek. It is open, we believe, to all men.

We are excused from considering "another's conception of God." But we are not excused from coming to believe in a God or being willing to so believe. We are however faced with the concept of a male God ("as we understood Him") and the ubiquitous saying of the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father") at meetings and Assemblies. It is asserted that we need to admit to the possibility of a creationist God under the term "Creative Intelligence." At the end of the paragraph we are admonished to earnestly seek because the "Realm of Spirit" [God] is not open and is forbidden to those who do not "earnestly seek." This is followed by a contra assertion that it is open "to all men." Which is not true since I, as many other atheists, have honestly examined the issue and have come to believe there is no God.

When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God. This applies, too, to other spiritual expressions which you find in this book. Do not let any prejudice you may have against spiritual terms deter you from honestly asking yourself what they mean to you. At the start, this was all we needed to commence spiritual growth, to effect our first conscious relation with God as we understood Him. Afterward, we found ourselves accepting many things which then seemed entirely out of reach. That was growth, but if we wished to grow we had to begin somewhere. So we used our own conception, however limited it was.

Here is serious doubt, in AA literature and in listening at meetings, that one's "own conception of God" is limited to a supreme being. If one has a conception of a no-God, that conception is excluded. Here is another assertion of prejudice being the obstacle. And, the statement that wished for growth is a personal conception but clearly one of a God. Atheists and agnostics are expected to convert. The prejudice here is a theistic one.

We needed to ask ourselves but one short question. "Do I now believe, or am I even willing to believe, that there is a Power greater than myself?" As soon as a man can say that he does believe, or is willing to believe, we emphatically assure him that he is on his way. It has been repeatedly proven among us that upon this simple cornerstone a wonderfully effective spiritual structure can be built.

Isn't the real question "Do I now believe, or am I willing to believe in God?" As noted earlier, the upercase "P" in Power clearly designates God. Most of us recognize powers greater than ourselves, particularly the strength of a team or a focused group. "Repeatedly proven among us." It is repeatedly proven among Roman Catholics that Catholicism is the way. The same is repeatedly proven among Protestants that theirs is the way. Is it not conceivable that atheists and agnostics have a successful no-God way of working the AA program? That this is not widely known is because the majority of atheists and agnostics in Alcoholics Anonymous are secret about their nonbelief. We don't speak out for fear of being ostracized or subjected to conversion pressures no matter how gentle or well meaning.

That was great news to us, for we had assumed we could not make use of spiritual principles unless we accepted many things on faith which seemed difficult to believe. When people presented us with spiritual approaches, how frequently did we all say, "I wish I had what that man has. I'm sure it would work if I could only believe as he believes. But I cannot accept as surely true the many articles of faith which are so plain to him." So it was comforting to learn that we could commence at a simpler level.

The assumption that all have such yearnings is specious. Even those who have a God in their lives come to the program for sobriety, not for a spiritual way of life.

Besides a seeming inability to accept much on faith, we often found ourselves handicapped by obstinacy, sensitiveness, and unreasoning prejudice. Many of us have been so touchy that even casual reference to spiritual things made us bristle with antagonism. This sort of thinking had to be abandoned. Though some of us resisted, we found no great difficulty in casting aside such feelings.

Faced with alcoholic destruction, we soon became as open minded on spiritual matters as we had tried to be on other questions. In this respect alcohol was a great persuader. It finally beat us into a state of reasonableness. Sometimes this was a tedious process; we hope no one else will be prejudiced for as long as some of us were.

"Inability to accept much on faith?" Think about this for a moment in context of this chapter and the program as a whole and you must admit that it means faith in God. All of us have faith, a lot of faith. Faith that we will awake, that the commute to work will be successful, that our lunch will not poison us, that we will get home . . . "Obstinacy, sensitiveness, and unreasoning prejudice." Many in Alcoholics Anonymous have these in relation to atheists and agnostics in AA who are successfully sober without belief in a God.

The reader may still ask why he should believe in a Power greater than himself. We think there are good reasons. Let us have a look at some of them.

The practical individual of today is a stickler for facts and results. Nevertheless, the twentieth century readily accepts theories of all kinds, provided they are firmly grounded in fact. We have numerous theories, for example, about electricity. Everybody believes them without a murmur of doubt. Why this ready acceptance? Simply because it is impossible to explain what we see, feel, direct, and use, without a reasonable assumption as a starting point.

Everybody nowadays, believes in scores of assumptions for which there is good evidence, but no perfect visual proof. And does not science demonstrate that visual proof is the weakest proof? It is being constantly revealed, as mankind studies the material world, that outward appearances are not inward reality at all. To illustrate:

Power again = God. The Twentieth and Twenty first centuries in the U.S. have accepted many theories. However the U.S. still lags behind the world in accepting the truth of evolution. Only Turkey has a greater percentage of people rejecting evolution. Science is based upon testing which involves observations which are visual proof. Where did Bill get this? Yes, we can be fooled and optical illusions happen but science relies on observation. However, science is based on testing multiple times by many people, most of whom really would like to disprove the first scientist's hypothesis.

The prosaic steel girder is a mass of electrons whirling around each other at incredible speed. These tiny bodies are governed by precise laws, and these laws hold true throughout the material world. Science tells us so. We have no reason to doubt it. When, however, the perfectly logical assumption is suggested that underneath the material world and life as we see it, there is an All Powerful, Guiding, Creative Intelligence, right there our perverse streak comes to the surface and we laboriously set out to convince ourselves it isn't so. We read wordy books and indulge in windy arguments, thinking we believe this universe needs no God to explain it. Were our contentions true, it would follow that life originated out of nothing, means nothing, and proceeds nowhere.

The first underlined item is now an oversimplification or simply seriously out of date. A problem with "freezing" the wording of Alcoholics Anonymous. The "laws" of physics are true throughout the known universe, not just the world. "Laws" here are greatly misunderstood when thought of as something handed down, as in man-made laws. A

physical law is simple a statement of how things always seem to work. The law (theory) of light stated that light travels in a straight line until Einstein's theory that gravity bends light was proven by observation (visual proof). Bill's theistic foundation is evident in the omnipotent and creationist description of his conception of God.

Life has great meaning, especially for atheists. It is all we have and we must make the best of what we have. If one's only meaning in life is some promised after-death paradise then life has no meaning except to gain some promised reward, be it harp playing while singing or seventy-two virgins (according to some scholars, white raisins).

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

Clear evidence that Bill could not have been speaking for all Agnostics, much less all atheists. I, and those atheists I whom know, and most scientists (who, by the way, are atheist – look it up) know that human intelligence does not have the last word. This is why science labels its “proven facts/laws” as theories; the theory of gravitation, the theory of light, the theory of evolution. In my experience, the more intelligent the person is, the more humble he or she is.

We, who have traveled this dubious path, beg you to lay aside prejudice, even against organized religion. We have learned that whatever the human frailties of various faiths may be, those faiths have given purpose and direction to millions. People of faith have a logical idea of what life is all about. Actually, we used to have no reasonable conception whatever. We used to amuse ourselves by cynically dissecting spiritual beliefs and practices when we might have observed that many spiritually-minded persons of all races, colors, and creeds were demonstrating a degree of stability, happiness and usefulness which we should have sought ourselves.

This paragraph really slanders sincere atheists and agnostics. “People of faith have a logical idea of what life is all about” implies that others, such as atheists and agnostics, do not have a logical idea of what life is all about. Theists in AA who take Bill's words as gospel must look at atheists and agnostics as evil and/or ignorant people, who have to be saved or shunned. Writing for all agnostics and atheists Bill paints us as cynics and probably pathetic beings. I will not stoop to pointing out the many evils God fearing people are currently perpetrating. The news is full of it.

Instead, we looked at the human defects of these people, and sometimes used their shortcomings as a basis of wholesale condemnation. We talked of intolerance, while we were intolerant ourselves. We missed the reality and the beauty of the forest because we were diverted by the ugliness of some of its trees. We never gave the spiritual side of life a fair hearing.

Read this paragraph again but with the “we” being “We theistic members of Alcoholics Anonymous looking at atheists and agnostics. . .” Now think about, who, during this most recent period of AA history, has been intolerant? Is it the atheists and agnostics or the theists? Read the “Minority Opinion” of the Mt. Rainer group and the anonymous “White

Paper” for examples of AA members hateful view of atheists and agnostics. Both are available on the internet. Where has been the open welcoming and acceptance of atheists and agnostics as members included without belief?

In our personal stories you will find a wide variation in the way each teller approaches and conceives of the Power which is greater than himself. Whether we agree with a particular approach or conception seems to make little difference. Experience has taught us that these are matters about which, for our purpose, we need not be worried. They are questions for each individual to settle for himself.

Remember these stories are selected to reflect Alcoholics Anonymous as it wishes to be seen, without controversy. Alcoholics Anonymous World Service has yet to openly accept atheists and agnostics as successfully sober members. It has not published literature on spirituality that included stories from atheists and agnostics who are successfully sober in AA (2010 General Service Conference Advisory Action #17) and have delayed publication, in booklet form, stories from atheists and agnostics which were previously published in the “Grapevine.” The pamphlet “Many Paths to Spirituality” has been a disappointment, especially to atheists and agnostics. The Grapevine is to be commended for in October 2016 issue featuring Atheist and Agnostic Members. Let’s see if the proposed booklet of past stories gets published. However, nothing here changes the impact of Chapter 4.

On one proposition, however, these men and women are strikingly agreed. Every one of them has gained access to, and believes in, a Power greater than himself. This Power has in each case accomplished the miraculous, the humanly impossible. As a celebrated American statesman put it, "Let's look at the record."

The stories were selected by the editor (Bill W.) [later by the trustees’ Literature Committee], why would they not reflect his premise? “Let’s look at the record” was a catch phrase of Al Smith, the losing Roman Catholic candidate for president of the United States in 1928. As for looking at the record, check out the Service work being done by atheist and agnostic members (if you can find them, we tend to remain anonymous about that).

Here are thousands of men and women, worldly indeed. They flatly declare that since they have come to believe in a Power greater than themselves, to take a certain attitude toward that Power, and to do certain simple things, there has been a revolutionary change in their way of living and thinking. In the face of collapse and despair, in the face of the total failure of their human resources, they found that a new power, peace, happiness, and sense of direction flowed into them. This happened soon after they wholeheartedly met a few simple requirements. Once confused and baffled by the seeming futility of existence, they show the underlying reasons why they were making heavy going of life. Leaving aside the drink question, they tell why living was so unsatisfactory. They show how the change came over them. When many hundreds of people are able to say that the consciousness of the Presence of God is today the most important fact of their lives, they present a powerful reason why one should have faith.

Running throughout this and other paragraphs is the error of using preselected sampling as evidence. Also present is the error of using large numbers or majorities as proof. A majority does not necessarily prove something as true. About 67% of the world's religious people are not Christian, effectively they believe Christians are wrong. Is it true that Christians are wrong?

This world of ours has made more material progress in the last century than in all the millenniums which went before. Almost everyone knows the reason. Students of ancient history tell us that the intellect of men in those days was equal to the best of today. Yet in ancient times material progress was painfully slow. The spirit of modern scientific inquiry, research and invention was almost unknown. In the realm of the material, men's minds were fettered by superstition, tradition, and all sorts of fixed ideas. Some of the contemporaries of Columbus thought a round earth preposterous. Others came near putting Galileo to death for his astronomical heresies.

"Students of ancient history tell us that intellect of men in those days was equal to the best of today." This is just plain suspicious on the surface. I wonder what today's physicists would have to say about this. Let us never forget that those who would condemn Galileo Galilei were God-fearing clerics, theists all.

We asked ourselves this: Are not some of us just as biased and unreasonable about the realm of the spirit as were the ancients about the realm of the material? Even in the present century, American newspapers were afraid to print an account of the Wright brothers' first successful flight at Kitty Hawk. Had not all efforts at flight failed before? Did not Professor Langley's flying machine go to the bottom of the Potomac River? Was it not true that the best mathematical minds had proved man could never fly? Had not people said God had reserved this privilege to the birds? Only thirty years later the conquest of the air was almost an old story and airplane travel was in full swing.

Just one historical point. The Wright brothers were notoriously publicity shy and secretive. This greatly contributed to some suppression of news of their flight. But what is the point of this paragraph? Is it that Mankind can be wrong? No one argues against that. Accepting that mankind can be wrong, is it not possible that atheists and agnostics can be sober in Alcoholics Anonymous without God and understood by anyone? Is it possible that theistic members of AA are biased and unreasonable in their views?

But in most fields our generation has witnessed complete liberation of our thinking. Show any longshoreman a Sunday supplement describing a proposal to explore the moon by means of a rocket and he will say "I bet they do it - maybe not so long either." Is not our age characterized by the ease with which we discard old ideas for new, by the complete readiness with which we throw away the theory or gadget which does not work for something new which does?

Two points: (1) Evolution (2) Atheists and agnostics successfully sober in AA. "Complete liberation of our thinking" is a two-way street.

We had to ask ourselves why we shouldn't apply to our human problems this same readiness to change our point of view. We were having trouble with personal relationships, we couldn't control our emotional natures, we were a prey to misery and depression, we couldn't make a living, we had a feeling of uselessness, we were full of fear, we were unhappy, we couldn't seem to be of real help to other people - was not a basic solution of these bedevilements more important than whether we should see newsreels of lunar flight? Of course it was.

When we saw others solve their problems by a simple reliance upon the Spirit of the Universe, we had to stop doubting the power of God. Our ideas did not work. But the God idea did.

The Wright brothers' almost childish faith that they could build a machine which would fly was the main-spring of their accomplishment. Without that, nothing could have happened. We agnostics and atheists were sticking to the idea that self-sufficiency would solve our problems. When others showed us that "God-sufficiency" worked with them, we began to feel like those who had insisted the Wrights would never fly.

"Change our point of view." Recognize that atheists and agnostics can be and are successfully sober in Alcoholics Anonymous. "We agnostics and atheists . . ." as with this critique, neither Bill Wilson nor I speak for all atheists and agnostics. Throughout this chapter Bill's well-known egotism shines through. "Self-sufficiency would solve our problems" may have been Bill's issue and a few of his followers but every atheist or agnostic I've encountered in Alcoholics Anonymous relies on the group and fellow alcoholics to help solve our problems.

Concerning the Wright brothers "almost childish faith" being the "main-spring of their accomplishment" – consider the engineering and science they employed, especially their home made wind tunnel. It was science not childish faith.

Logic is great stuff. We liked it. We still like it. It is not by chance we were given the power to reason, to examine the evidence of our senses, and to draw conclusions. That is one of man's magnificent attributes. We agnostically inclined would not feel satisfied with a proposal which does not lend itself to reasonable approach and interpretation. Hence we are at pains to tell why we think our present faith is reasonable, why we think it more sane and logical to believe than not to believe, why we say our former thinking was soft and mushy when we threw up our hands in doubt and said, "We don't know."

"Evidence of our senses" and "agnostically inclined" were discussed earlier. Our senses include vision, observations – a critical part of seeking truth. Many atheists and agnostics are not "inclined" but convinced and confirmed. Again, bias showing through.

Thousands of atheists and agnostics have logically come to the conclusion that it is best to believe there is no being qualifying to be titled "God" or to suspend judgment for lack of evidence. They think it more reasonable not to believe than to blindly accept others' gods. Many of these seek help with alcoholism only to find that they are called upon to find a god (i.e. Higher Power) because those around them are theists who believe Bill Wilson states that all atheists and agnostics will come to believe. Think about the rejection this engenders.

When we became alcoholics, crushed by a self-imposed crisis we could not postpone or evade, we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing. God either is, or He isn't. What was our choice to be?

Arrived at this point, we were squarely confronted with the question of faith. We couldn't duck the issue. Some of us had already walked far over the Bridge of Reason toward the desired shore of faith. The outlines and the promise of the New Land had brought lustre [sic] to tired eyes and fresh courage to flagging spirits. Friendly hands had stretched out in welcome. We were grateful that Reason had brought us so far. But somehow, we couldn't quite step ashore. Perhaps we had been leaning too heavily on Reason that last mile and we did not like to lose our support.

We have chosen to go with lack of evidence, lack of proof. "Bridge of Reason" here most likely refers to a once popular religious song about faith (in God) being more important than reason. Instructively, the song begins, "The second before you die" possibly contributing to the widely based theistic belief that atheists convert to God on their death bed. "Friendly hands had stretched out in welcome" is not the experience of many nonbelievers once they are identified. The conclusion of "leaning too heavily on Reason" calls up an image of belief without reason, something nonbelievers are uninclined to do.

That was natural, but let us think a little more closely. Without knowing it, had we not been brought to where we stood by a certain kind of faith? For did we not believe in our own reasoning? Did we not have confidence in our ability to think? What was that but a sort of faith? Yes, we had been faithful, objectly faithful to the God of Reason. So, in one way or another, we discovered that faith had been involved all the time!

First we are going to "think a little more closely" in order to find that we have made a god out of thinking, the "God of Reason" which leads us to realizing that we have "faith." It is, however, "a certain kind of faith" which will next be used to mean a religious faith, a faith leading to a god. Many of us atheists and agnostics have thought very closely and have decided that there is insufficient evidence for a god or gods. Many have university degrees which either include courses in theology or even a major therein. It may be argued that we thought or were taught into atheism or agnosticism. It is rather pompous to claim reason as the property of a selected group or a god.

We found, too, that we had been worshippers. What a state of mental goose-flesh that used to bring on! Had we not variously worshipped people, sentiment, things, money, and ourselves? And then, with a better motive, had we not worshipfully beheld the sunset, the sea, or a flower? Who of us had not loved something or somebody? How much did these feelings, these loves, these worships, have to do with pure reason? Little or nothing, we saw at last. Were not these things the tissue out of which our lives were constructed? Did not these feelings, after all, determine the course of our existence? It was impossible to say we had no capacity for faith, or love, or worship. In one form or another we had been living by faith and little else.

The question, "had we not worshipfully beheld ..." is easily taken to indicate devotion to some false god; yet we are told that we can make God anything of our understanding. Beholding the sunset, the sea, or a flower is open to everyone without being worshipful. "In

one form or another we had been living by faith and little else" is too generally taken to be faith in a Higher Power (God) rather than a general trust. Rather than faith it is actually hope. When active alcoholics we all had hope of some kind, hope for another drink for example.

Imagine life without faith! Were nothing left but pure reason, it wouldn't be life. But we believed in life - of course we did. We could not prove life in the sense that you can prove a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, yet, there it was. Could we still say the whole thing was nothing but a mass of electrons, created out of nothing, meaning nothing, whirling on to a destiny of nothingness? Of course we couldn't. The electrons themselves seemed more intelligent than that. At least, so the chemist said.

"Imagine life without faith" is a great start here, but what did Bill Wilson mean by "faith?" If it is religious in any sense he has set up a false premise. We all live with faith in a secular way; faith in elevators, in the safety of food sold in restaurants or stores, the flow of traffic, etc. "Prove life?" Everyone can prove life by the simple statement, "I am alive." We do have some difficulty proving death, however. The proof of death is often difficult in cases of brain death and many medical doctors will attest. Well modern science has shown that we are, in fact, a "mass of electrons." The rest of Bill's modifiers simply show his bias.

Hence, we saw that reason isn't everything. Neither is reason, as most of us use it, entirely dependable, though it emanate from our best minds. What about people who proved that man could never fly?

Of course "reason isn't everything," who's to argue? And the expansion of "as most of us use it" is also obvious, except for "though it emanate from our best minds." This is followed by the example of those people who "proved man could not fly." It misses completely the opposite example of the theoretical physicist who said light is bent by gravity and that $e=mc^2$. Or the U.S. president who believed man could go to the moon and back. What about all the people who claim that you can't get sober without God? What about the inability of proving the existence of God to the satisfaction of all? Consider those who have to deny the truth before their eyes and claim that a sober atheist or agnostic in AA was not a "real" alcoholic.

Yet we had been seeing another kind of flight, a spiritual liberation from this world, people who rose above their problems. They said God made these things possible, and we only smiled. We had seen spiritual release, but liked to tell ourselves it wasn't true.

Actually we were fooling ourselves, for deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of God. It may be obscured by calamity, by pomp, by worship of other things, but in some form or other it is there. For faith in a Power greater than ourselves, and miraculous demonstrations of that power in human lives, are facts as old as man himself.

We finally saw that faith in some kind of God was a part of our make-up, just as much as the feeling we have for a friend. Sometimes we had to search fearlessly, but He was there. He was as much a

fact as we were. We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found. It was so with us.

No need to claim we have been “fooling ourselves.” Belief in a god or gods is a product of natural selection, of our need to sense something guiding us and caring for and about us. That is why every civilization has had a god or gods that fit their needs at the time. Bill Wilson inadvertently admits to this when he acknowledges that in the last analysis God can only be found “deep down within us.”

We can only clear the ground a bit. If our testimony helps sweep away prejudice, enables you to think honestly, encourages you to search diligently within yourself, then, if you wish, you can join us on the Broad Highway. With this attitude you cannot fail. The consciousness of your belief is sure to come to you.

Ignoring AA’s assertion that “the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking” and the claim that members are not “required to believe anything,” this short paragraph sets parameters for membership and delivers insults along the way. That one must “sweep away prejudice” actually asserts that before AA all alcoholics are prejudiced. That one must “think honestly” implies that those who do not think like or agree with others in AA will not be welcome to “join us.” It calls for people like me to “search diligently,” presuming that I haven’t done so until I believe as Bill W. and other theists believe. I and other atheists and agnostics are being called prejudiced, dishonest, and unreflective; shallow people who are not welcome to join AA members in recovery.

This paragraph negates the possibility that, thinking, honest, prejudice-free, diligent atheists and agnostics can be able to lead successfully sober lives in Alcoholics Anonymous with no-god.

If there can be people from Protestant denominations, Roman Catholic dispositions, Jews, and the like – whose religious cannons are in disagreement – yet all successfully sober in AA how can atheists and agnostics be considered outcast just because they reject one more god than the others?

In this book you will read the experience of a man who thought he was an atheist. His story is so interesting that some of it should be told now. His change of heart was dramatic, convincing, and moving.

Note that Bill Wilson presents, from here on, the story of a man who “thought he was an atheist.” He only thought he was (but wasn’t really) an atheist. Why not also include a story of an atheist or agnostic who was a nonbeliever throughout and was successfully sober in Alcoholics Anonymous? Bill did have among his earliest members Jim B., why not use him too? I posit that it is because Bill Wilson wanted all to become theists of some sort.

Our friend was a minister's son. He attended church school, where he became rebellious at what he thought an overdose of religious education. For years thereafter he was dogged by trouble and frustration. Business failure, insanity, fatal illness, suicide - these calamities in his immediate family

embittered and depressed him. Post-war disillusionment, ever more serious alcoholism, impending mental and physical collapse, brought him to the point of self-destruction.

One night, when confined in a hospital, he was approached by an alcoholic who had known a spiritual experience. Our friend's gorge rose as he bitterly cried out: "If there is a God, He certainly hasn't done anything for me!" But later, alone in his room, he asked himself this question: "Is it possible that all the religious people I have known are wrong?" While pondering the answer he felt as though he lived in hell. Then, like a thunderbolt, a great thought came. It crowded out all else:

"Who are you to say there is no God?"

Who are you to say that there is a God? What are/were your theological credentials? Who are you or anyone to challenge my right or anyone's right to speak their conscience and sincere judgment or belief? Remember that truth is not determined by a majority vote. Millions can be and have been wrong.

This man recounts that he tumbled out of bed to his knees. In a few seconds he was overwhelmed by a conviction of the Presence of God. It poured over and through him with the certainty and majesty of a great tide at flood. The barriers he had built through the years were swept away. He stood in the Presence of Infinite Power and Love. He had stepped from bridge to shore. For the first time, he lived in conscious companionship with his Creator.

Thus was our friend's cornerstone fixed in place. No later vicissitude has shaken it. His alcoholic problem was taken away. That very night, years ago, it disappeared.

Save for a few brief moments of temptation the thought of drink has never returned; and at such times a great revulsion has risen up in him. Seemingly he could not drink even if he would. God had restored his sanity.

What is this but a miracle of healing? Yet its elements are simple. Circumstances made him willing to believe. He humbly offered himself to his Maker - then he knew.

Even so has God restored us all to our right minds. To this man, the revelation was sudden. Some of us grow into it more slowly. But He has come to all who have honestly sought Him.

Clearly this implies that atheist and agnostic members have remained in their wrong minds just as all were while active alcoholics. Bill clearly implies that any who claim to be atheists or agnostics and successfully sober in Alcoholics Anonymous have not honestly sought God. This is, in effect, calling every sober atheist/agnostic member of AA a liar or mistaken, deluded about his or her status. This does not fit well with the assertion that we are not required to believe anything. Nor with the only requirement for membership.

When we drew near to Him He disclosed Himself to us!

Finally, is Bill Wilson claiming the theistic members actually have seen and/or heard God? If so, does God disclose Himself in different forms leading to the popular expression "My God is (with some personal description)" heard from different members, tacitly elaborating on the expression "God, as we understood Him" seen in the Steps?

Additional Thoughts

What about all those who were desperate and humbly (on their knees) asked God with all their might and sincerity to help them stop drinking, to no avail? We are told “God could and would if He were sought.” [Alcoholics Anonymous, page 60 item (c).] Why did He not? “It’s a mystery” is a simplistic cop-out. Was it Bill W.’s claim that sobriety is only achievable through belief in God and the Twelve Steps? Is this also the assertion of Alcoholics Anonymous itself?

I have yet to hear someone identify as coming back after a relapse and report, “I continued to attend meetings every day but stopped praying.” I have heard many say they stopped going to meetings and then relapsed. It seems that attendance at meetings is more powerful than prayer. Possibly this is how atheists and agnostics become successfully sober in Alcoholics Anonymous.

To Theist Members

Like every atheist and agnostic AA member I know, we do not accuse our theist fellow members of dishonesty or unclear thinking. We have no desire to convert you away from your concept of god “as you understand Him.” We have no desire to see you come to believe there is no god unless that becomes your own decision.

We atheists and agnostics are real alcoholics, just like you, but we understand that no entity exists which deserves the title of god. We have served, and serve, in many A.A. service positions at group, district, Area, and even national levels.

Please try to understand and accept this and consider the extra work we have to do in order to make the Steps and Traditions work for us.

We simply want to be acknowledged as sincere, honest, successfully sober members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

* * *

Paul W has been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous since May 1989. He has held many service positions including Chairing a District Cooperation with the Professional Community committee, and a District Committee Member. Paul currently sponsors several recovering alcoholics and is a service sponsor to his home group’s General Service Representative. He first joined AA while he was attempting to hold onto belief in a God, but was put off by “all that God in the Twelve Steps.” Eventually Paul made peace with himself, stopped faking it while trying to make it and came out as a comfortable and convinced atheist. He has spoken at Area functions about the lack of literature for nonbelievers and was a supporter of the General Service Conference Advisory Action calling for literature on spirituality which would include stories from atheists and agnostics who were successfully sober in Alcoholics Anonymous. Before retirement, he was a consultant with an international professional services firm where he specialized in education and organizational behavior. Paul and his wife of 57 years live in New Jersey, she a Christian and he an atheist. They have six children (50% atheists), six grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.