

Alcoholic Existence in the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous

Alkoholista egzisztencia az Anonim Alkoholisták közösségében

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Abstract

Based on his anthropological research performed among Hungarian members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the author summarizes some characteristics of the existence of alcoholics as meant by AA, as persons relating to themselves and to the world in a specific way. Among these characteristics are 1) the community of fate derived from alcoholic identity, 2) posterior responsibility, 3) structural parallelisms between the drama of the sin–redemption of Protestant Christian believers and the drama of the drinking–surrender of alcoholics, 4) inevitability of human beings’ dependency, and the freedom of choice between the different dependencies, 5) existential sharpness due to nearness of death, 6) the necessity of prompt change and the suspension of the moratorium of change, and 7) paradox dialectic of the material and spiritual world.

Keywords: Alcoholics Anonymous – cultural anthropology – existence – existentialism – Christianity – responsibility – dependency – freedom

Összefoglalás

A szerző az Anonim Alkoholisták (AA) körében végzett antropológiai kutatásai alapján összefoglalja az AA felfogása szerinti értelemben vett alkoholisták – mint önmagukhoz és a világhoz sajátos módon viszonyuló lények – egzisztenciájának néhány jellemzőjét. E jellemzők között szerepelnek 1) az alkoholista identitásból eredő sorsközösség, 2) az utólagos felelősség, 3) a protestáns keresztény hívők bűn–megváltás drámája és az alkoholisták ivás–surrender drámája közötti strukturális párhuzamok, 4) az ember függőségének elkerülhetetlensége és a különböző függések közötti választás szabadsága, 5) a halál közelségéből adódó egzisztenciális kiélezettség, 6) a változás azonnaliságának szükségessége és a változási moratórium felfüggesztése, illetve 7) a materiális és a spirituális világ ellentétének paradox dialektikája.

Kulcsszavak: Anonim Alkoholisták – kulturális antropológia – egzisztencia – egzisztencializmus – kereszténység – felelősség – függőség – szabadság

During my recent anthropological fieldwork among Hungarian members of Alcoholics Anonymous, I made some attempts to explore how persons sobering in AA think about themselves. I have concluded that alcoholics differ from ‘normies’, as they identify persons belonging to the majority of the society. They have some fundamental features which differentiate them from this majority; and they share these characteristics with their own group. In the current paper I summarize some of my findings on the core features of *alcoholic existence*.

By “alcoholic existence” I mean a special mode of being. Questions like “How is s/he in the world?”, “How does s/he relate to herself or himself?” or “How does s/he relate to the world?” can clarify the concept. Although this concept is near the concept of existence in existentialism (cf. Heidegger, 1989, pp. 100-101), I will not join directly this philosophical

movement in my paper. Since I focus my attention on the beliefs of AA members, and I will not query them, my approach will differ from the model that has been adopted by the followers of the existentialist conception of dependency. (Wurm, 2003) According to the upholders of this conception, the basic characteristics of human beings are that they inevitably have to make choices at all times, and this holds even to the periods of active drinking: they always have the choice to drink or not to drink, irrespectively of their addiction. The idea obviously clashes with the belief of AA, that an alcoholic, as far as only her own (will)power is concerned, is totally "powerless over alcohol." (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2007: 21)

The fundamental precondition of belonging to the fellowship of AA is the member's self-identification as an alcoholic. As several notions of AA historically derive from Protestantism – namely, from the Oxford Group –, this self-identification shows a structural analogy with the Christian notion of sin. In Christianity, due to the influence of Paul the Apostle, a common "weakness", sin, has become a universal characteristic, a common property of humanity, thereby forming a community of fate. Similarly, in AA a common plague, alcoholism, is the distinctive feature which gives identity to its members, and forms a community of fate of them. This is an analogy of the narrative frames only, which seems to preserve the Christian origins of AA, and does not entail that AA members regard alcoholism as sin. Quite the contrary: AA distinguishes itself from any kind of religions, and definitely states that alcoholism is not a sin.

According to the Big Book of AA, alcoholics are sick, which, from an existential perspective, represents a limit-situation (Jaspers, 2008: 110-111): an unchangeable state in their existence. They are citizens of another world, in which natural agents work in a different way: as compared to 'normies', alcohol has a different effect on them. (Antze, 1987) They are alcohol-dependents, because of their sickness, overwhelmingly craving for alcohol, and not being able to abstain from it steadily. They drink continuously, or, if they have dry periods, the days, weeks, months or even years lead to a subsequent drinking period sooner or later; and when drinking, they cannot control the amount. According to the beliefs of AA members, their attempts to control their drinking under their own power are inevitably foredoomed to failure. As they believe, no matter how long they have been abstaining from alcohol, they will never be able to drink "normally", in a controlled manner.

Since they are sick they cannot help their state, so they are not responsible for it. In the inchoative stage of alcoholism, as a part of the disease, they are not aware, or deny that they are on the verge of losing control over their drinking. They realize their dependency only after they have "hit bottom", but they usually cannot overcome their compulsion to drink under their own power by that time. Their responsibility for their drinking is posterior: they make amends to people harmed during the periods of active alcoholism, as a part of the program of AA, that is, after they have stopped drinking. According to AA members, they are not responsible for their addiction, yet posteriorly they take responsibility for the destructive deeds they committed during their drinking. In the periods of active alcoholism, their minds work erroneously, and they are deprived of their free will. Despite their own notion of posterior responsibility, the doubts raised by the existentialists presupposing that people have free choices at all times, and the popular mind often moving within the confines of the "moral model" of addiction (Wurm, 2003: 177), AA insists that alcoholics cannot help their disease and they are not responsible for it.

Viewing the question of responsibility from another perspective, according to the ideas of AA, when alcoholics come to the admission of their defeat against alcohol, and begin sobering up with the help of their Higher Power, their responsibility for drinking changes fundamentally. As long as they do not have the solution to the problem of their addiction (sc. the surrender to a Higher Power), they are powerless over alcohol, and consequently, they are not responsible for their drinking. However, when they have found the solution, and regained their ability to choose, they become responsible for their present-day and future drinking.

AA distinguishes three basic states of the alcoholics: they can be wet, dry or sober. Wet and dry alcoholics differ only at the level of the symptom. The former drink actively, while the latter are abstinent, though under their own power, forcedly, and, for most of the time, temporarily. While the former are "positive", the latter are "negative" alcoholics; in essence, nevertheless, both are active alcoholics. The root of alcoholism is at the level of the character, and wet and dry alcoholics equally operate in accordance with the ego-centred and ego-controlled alcoholic character, which places their own egos in the centre of the world. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 62) Due to their plethoric ego, they become isolated from others; they have a stressful, anxious, resentful and unrealistic relationship with the world, with others and with themselves, which they try to relieve with alcohol or other "techniques", modifying their state of mind. Sober alcoholics are basically different from them: they do not operate in an ego-controlled manner, but removing their egos from the centre of the world, surrendering to a Higher Power, committing themselves to its will, and making spiritual progress in this way, they change in their character, too. This is how they dissolve the tension described above at a deeper level, truly becoming free from their craving for alcohol. In this progress, it is the renunciation of the ego that enables them to transcend the alcoholic ego. As Antze (1987) has concluded, the drama of alcoholics is analogous with the drama of man in Protestantism: they are powerless, defenceless against alcohol or sin, and they realize it only in the depths of despair, from which they can be saved by a Higher Power or the grace of God.

The release from craving for alcohol does not mean getting rid of all kinds of dependency at the same time. The alcoholic existence resembles the Christian existence regarding the idea that alcoholics, like every human being, are inevitably dependent beings. As Saint Augustine (1997, p. 80, pp. 136-137) conceived, the essence of sin is that people have placed themselves pridefully in the position of God, or in other words, abusing their free will, they have turned away from God in order to possess inferior, earthly goods. As a consequence, they have lost their free will, and become slaves of sin. When people turn away from God they inevitably depend on, they find themselves in another kind of dependency: in the material world they will be dependent on things they should not necessarily depend on. It is a possible interpretation of AA's ideas that alcoholics are in a similar existential condition. The question is not how dependency evolves, or why some people are dependent while others are not. Every human being is dependent per se, so the only question is what they depend on. Either they consciously accept their dependency on God or a Higher Power, committing themselves to Him and effacing their egos in order to become free from other dependencies, or put their egos forward, repudiating their original dependency, and inevitably get entangled in other dependencies.

Alcoholics sobering in AA often differ from Christian believers, since their Higher Power is not necessarily defined as God. It may be almost anyone or anything, possessing greater power than theirs, even a non-transcendent entity like the AA itself. In a Batesonian view,

this Higher Power is a greater system containing the sobering person as an ecosystem (Bateson, 1971) According to this conceptualization, the spirituality of AA can essentially be summarized by stating that sobering people realise themselves as a part of a greater system. When adapting themselves to it in a complementary manner, the tension felt by them begins to dissolve, their relationship with themselves and the world gradually becomes harmonized. That is a forte of Bateson's AA-interpretation: the neutral concept of "system" fits well in the neutral, non-religious ideology of AA manifested in the term of Higher Power. At the same time, Bateson avoids using concepts like dependency and addiction, terms that fit well with the Christian ideas mentioned above, and which are necessary for understanding the conception of AA.

Considering the issue of freedom again, the existential state of alcoholics does not enable them to choose between being dependent or non-dependent. As human beings, they are dependent on greater powers, so they will always depend on somebody or something. They cannot put an end to their alcohol-dependency by their own will, but they *can* surrender themselves to dependency on a Higher Power (cf. Augustine, 1997, p. 121), in this way getting rid of their compulsion to drink. Therefore they are not free to choose between dependency and non-dependency, but they are free to choose between the two kinds of dependencies. This is prominent if we consider the relationship between individuals sobering in AA and the fellowship of AA as a whole. The fellowship of AA is a manifestation of the Higher Power for AA members, what is more, it may be the Higher Power itself for atheist members; and AA members often say that they *have to* attend AA meetings to maintain their sobriety, and they will be AA-dependent for the rest of their lives. They have changed their former dependency to another one.

The alcoholic existence, as we see it with the eyes of AA members, has a remarkable difference as compared to the "common man" of Christian culture, namely, the suspension of the moratorium to change. Non-alcoholic people may commit sins. According to the Christian teachings, it is possible that some of them live sinful lives, which result in damnation, often named as "second death". Living sinful lives, nevertheless, they do not die physically; for example they do not die physically when violating one of the Ten Commandments. Christians have a moratorium: until their physical lives end, which is the "first death", they have the opportunity to repent, and turn away from sin with the help of God. In contrast to it, in alcoholic existence this moratorium is suspended. For alcoholics, there is no such a significant temporal difference between the first and the second death, or at least it is shorter. Although most of the AA members, as mentioned above, do not use the term 'sin', they think that resentment, pride, selfishness, dishonour, and practically everything that is traditionally regarded as sin, when tendentiously occurring in their lives, will make them drink; and alcohol is a "deadly poison" for them. Therefore, alcoholics sobering in AA are in a more sharpened existential situation than 'normies'; and surrendering themselves to their Higher Power, and focusing on spiritual development become devices of mere physical survival for them at the same time, which is a special incentive to change their cognitive, emotional and behavioural patterns. They do not have the normies' moratorium, the consequences of their negative emotions, thoughts or deeds are more immediate and serious, so time is more pressing for them. As we can read in Step Ten of AA: "when we were wrong *promptly* admitted it." (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2007, p. 90 – italics mine) The constant proximity of death can turn even the smallest slip a fatal event, so it definitely plays an important role in forming AA lifestyle: AA members often have a deeper self-knowledge, and they live a more self-reflective and conscious life than a lot of 'normies'.

Alcoholics, just like Christian believers, are in a paradoxical existential situation; they are at the border of two worlds: the material world dominated by selfishness, and the world of spirit, where meanings used in the material world often turn into their opposites. It is very well represented in a saying of Jesus: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (Matthew 16:25) Things that are advantageous in one world can be disadvantageous in the other world. Those, who get on in an egoistic way, making themselves gods, can win their worldly lives, but they lose the life which could have been theirs in the world of spirit. In the world of spirit, contrarily, people can become who they are by giving up their egos, surrendering to their Higher Power and serving others. Similarly, giving up control and surrendering to their Higher Power liberate them, while the illusive freedom of refusing the dependency on their Higher Power makes them dependent on their passions. Giving up themselves makes them who they are, and service makes them free; while they lose themselves by putting themselves forward, and become servants of their addictions through the illusory domination of their egos. The strange phrases like "I am so lucky that I am an alcoholic!", which are often unintelligible for 'normies' (cf. Kelemen & B. Erdős, 2004, pp. 96-100), are rooted in this paradoxical dialectic of the two worlds. In the above sentence, alcoholism is not a burden anymore; the disadvantage becomes an advantage, the meaningless turns into meaningful; so it becomes a strength that helps sobering persons be reborn, find a community, and a Higher Power.

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