

Virtues and Vices

In books on the history of spirituality, there will often be discussions of the virtues which are taught in each of the different systems which are included in the study. These lists of virtues are important, because they show how each of these systems conceives of the goal of the spiritual life, and in addition, they also frequently give us some insight into how that particular group of teachers believes that we can achieve that goal.

Cleveland A.A. and the Four Absolutes

Cleveland, Ohio, was located right on Lake Erie. It was very close to Akron, the place where A.A. started, which was only thirty miles inland. But Cleveland very quickly developed its own style of A.A. One of its distinctive features was the stress placed upon the Oxford Group idea of the Four Absolutes and the Four Questions. In order to practice these virtues, we needed to learn to ask these fundamental questions when we were making our everyday decisions.

ABSOLUTE HONESTY

"Is it true or is it false?"

ABSOLUTE UNSELFISHNESS

"How will this affect the other fellow?"

ABSOLUTE LOVE

"Is it ugly or is it beautiful?"

ABSOLUTE PURITY

"Is it right or is it wrong?"

But the Four Absolutes were never talked about in early A.A. in many places outside of Cleveland. Richmond Walker, who had been in the Oxford Group before he joined A.A., does give the list "honesty, unselfishness, love, and purity" at various points in his *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, but he never describes them as "absolutes." Bill Wilson did not like this list at all, and said bluntly that "alcoholics do not do well with absolutes." In fact, it can all too easily produce a return to the kind of moralism and legalism which drives alcoholics to despair.

Minneapolis: the The Six Central Virtues

By the time he was putting together [the 1949 edition of *The Little Red Book*](#), Ed Webster decided to put a list of virtues at the beginning. In that edition, he had five virtues which he wished to use, which were very different from the Four Absolutes: Humility, Honesty, Faith, Courage, and Appreciation.

As we can see from the 1987 edition of *The Little Red Book*, Ed made further changes to that section over the years. He changed Appreciation to Gratitude, and added a sixth virtue, Service:

HUMILITY HONESTY FAITH

COURAGE GRATITUDE SERVICE

Honesty was the only virtue which appeared on both lists, in both Cleveland and Minneapolis, so the A.A. people in the two cities were looking at things from a slightly different perspective.

Although there are some A.A. people today who remain very loyal to the Oxford Group teaching about the Four Absolutes, we need to remember that *The Little Red Book* was put together with Dr. Bob's continual suggestions and comments. Ed Webster also attended all of the annual Founders Day Camping Trips held in Minnesota from 1944 to 1947, where it was not only Dr. Bob who was present, but also a number of other very important people in early midwestern A.A., including the founders of A.A. in places like Minneapolis, Detroit and Chicago. And Ed remained in contact with these people, so he was receiving some very important and significant input as he put together the early editions of *The Little Red Book*.

We need to take that book very seriously, not only as an example of the best kind of old-time A.A. teaching, but also as probably the

closest we are ever going to get to a view of Dr. Bob's interpretation of A.A. unmediated through the theoretical structures which Bill W. tended to impose on Dr. Bob's thoughts when he put these ideas into his own words.

In the 1987 edition of *The Little Red Book*: "Courage: A quality of mind which enables us to deal with the problems and realities of life without reliance on alcohol; fortitude to endure the things we cannot change; a determination to stand our ground asking God's help in all issues, pleasant or otherwise, that might return us to drinking; fearlessness in the practice of faith, humility, honesty, and self-denial."

In the 1987 edition of *The Little Red Book*: "Gratitude: Gratitude continues the miracle of our sobriety. Gratitude is a healthy mental attitude; as we develop gratitude we enlarge our capacity for happiness, service, and contented sobriety. A lack of gratitude may lead to the first drink; gratitude and sobriety go hand in hand."

In the 1987 edition of *The Little Red Book*: "Service: Service to God and our fellow human beings is the key to A.A. success. Helping other alcoholics who need and want help gives us the tolerance and humility necessary to contented sobriety. Service combats self-centeredness. It reminds us of our powerlessness over alcohol. Intelligent, unselfish service is the lifeblood of the A.A. fellowship."

Detroit and Washington D.C.

The Detroit/Washington D.C. Pamphlet was titled *Alcoholics Anonymous: An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps*.

Detroit had started giving beginners' lessons on [June 14, 1943](#). The materials which the Detroit people had written up, which they originally called *The Table Leaders Guide*, were probably first set down on paper in a rough typewritten version which circulated in mimeographed form. This material was first published in printed form by the Washington D.C. groups in a pamphlet called *An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps*. Detroit then quickly came out with their own printed version of the pamphlet, probably only a few months later. This is still in print today and obtainable from the Detroit A.A. office. Detroit publishes it under the title *Alcoholics Anonymous: An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps*. (Click here for [a full version of the Detroit Pamphlet online](#).)

A letter which Bobby Burger (the secretary of the Alcoholism Foundation in New York) wrote to Barry Collins in Minneapolis, dated November 11, 1944, refers to what she called "the Washington D.C. pamphlet." So we know for sure that the A.A. group in Washington D.C. had printed its version by that date.

Jack H. has another version of that pamphlet (with only very slight differences) which has on page 23: "Alcoholics Anonymous, Oklahoma City Group, Post Office Box 202, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," and another version of the pamphlet printed in Seattle.

This widely-used Detroit/Washington D.C. pamphlet had a much longer list of virtues. At the top of the list they put six major virtues:

WILLINGNESS HONESTY OPEN-MINDEDNESS
FAITH HOPE TRUST

In addition to the six principal virtues listed above, the Detroit/Washington D.C. Pamphlet also lists a number of other important virtues, which we ought to learn to cultivate as we work Steps 4 through 7.

Humility and modesty	Restfulness	A sense of simple justice
Willingness to pray	Simplicity	A spirit of fairness
Calmness and relaxation	Patience	Common sense
Quiet	Fearlessness	Generosity

Honest pride in work well done	Conscious contact with God
Willingness to turn to the spiritual	Industry (go to work and really work)

The Detroit/Washington D.C. Pamphlet combined this list of virtues with a long list of vices (or character defects) which commonly get alcoholics in trouble. In the Sixth and Seventh Steps, our goal is to begin replacing the following character defects with the positive virtues listed above:

Materialism	Resentment	Hatred
Egotism	Anger	Revengefulness
Selfishness	Envy	Laziness
False pride	Jealousy	Impatience
Being superior and over-critical	Lack of common honesty	Deceit
		Rebelliousness

Bill W. and the Seven Deadly Sins

In the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (p. 48), Bill Wilson gave the classical list of the Seven Vices as one possible guide for doing a Fourth Step:

PRIDE GREED LUST ANGER
GLUTTONY ENVY SLOTH

A better name for this last vice is Accidie, because in the middle ages the word sloth did not mean simple laziness but was a much more sophisticated psychological concept. In Dante's *Inferno* for example, Accidie is described as anger turned back on itself to produce totally crippling depression and despair.

Evagrius Ponticus, one of the most formative early medieval spiritual writers, gave a slightly different but also very interesting interpretation. He called Accidie the Devil of the Noonday Sun, because it was the mental vice that made our minds generate all sorts of logical sounding reasons for quitting whatever we were doing, once the sun got hot and we got tired. Accidie was what kept us from ever finishing anything. Evagrius said that this was the most difficult vice of all to deal with, far more difficult than dealing with problems involving sex and anger.

In the middle ages, alcoholism was included under the category of Gluttony. They certainly knew about it. In fact, alcoholism began the first time primitive human beings realized the delightful effects of grape juice if you let it sit in a clay jar for a few days before you drank it.

Bill interpreted the vices and virtues in line with the teaching of the ancient pagan Greek philosopher Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where the virtuous action was the mean between two extremes. "Seek the Golden Mean" was Aristotle's ethical advice. True courage, for example, was the balance point which lay between the extremes of cowardice on the one hand, and blind foolhardiness on the other. You could not give a mechanical rule for moral behavior. It meant learning to achieve balance in your life, which required individual acts of judgment and responsibility in each new situation. This was one of the reasons why Bill W. had such a deep dislike of the Four Absolutes: they made it sound like there were absolute moral rules which one could follow mechanically. Trying to save yourself that way inevitably leads into moralism, legalism, and works righteousness, and never produces real serenity.

Following St. Augustine's spiritual teachings (as set forth for example in the *City of God*), Bill W. saw Pride as the root sin. The African saint's word for Pride was *superbia*, the crazed attempt to be superhuman and all-superior. Bill Wilson speaks of this vice under a variety of names: the out-of-control ego that has to be deflated before we can begin working the twelve steps, self-will run riot, the absence of any humility at all, and the desire to be God ourselves which makes us refuse to surrender our wills and lives to God's care. But these are all simply different names for Pride. Bill W.'s understanding of the human problem in all of his writings is Augustinian to the core.

What Bill left out of this list was the vice which he had described in the Big Book (pp. 60-61) as one of the most serious character defects, trying to play the stage director and order all the other actors and actresses around. The ancient name for this character defect, as we see in the writings of Augustine, the great African saint, was the *libido dominandi*, that is, the lust to control and dominate other people.

One of the hardest things to explain to newcomers to the twelve-step program (and this includes Al-Anon's as well as A.A.'s) is that it does not matter if I can "prove" that I am right and the other people I am dealing with are wrong. If I am trying to over-dominate the other people around me, I will eventually drive myself crazy trying to get them "to behave," and I will find that, no matter how hard I try, I will never be able to control them anyway. The *libido dominandi* is one of the deadliest of all the vices or deadly sins which afflict people who come into the twelve-step program!

It is true that the *libido dominandi* can be considered as a subcategory of Pride, and therefore understood as being included in the list which Bill W. drew up for the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. But it is such an important subcategory, that it usually needs to be considered all on its own when writing out a Fourth Step, and attempting to determine where all the resentment and fear is coming from, because most newcomers to the program will not realize that it is simply another variety of egotism.

What is not at all clear however, is why Bill W., when he was writing the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1952-53, totally ignored all the previous A.A. writing about the virtues and vices. The overwhelming majority of A.A. people have found that the way the names of the virtues and vices are given in *The Little Red Book*, the Detroit/Washington D.C. Pamphlet, and 1 Corinthians 13 give by far the most useful way of understanding the Fourth Step inventory, as well as the most helpful way to understand their own personal everyday experiences.

The Seven Virtues in the classical and medieval tradition

Bill W. set down the Seven Vices (or deadly sins) in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* but for some reason did not go on and list the Seven Virtues which were also part of that old classical tradition:

FORTITUDE TEMPERANCE PRUDENCE JUSTICE
FAITH HOPE LOVE

1. Courage or Fortitude was the willingness to do what our human reason told us was necessary even when we were afraid. It meant the proper use

of our human assertiveness and the ability to fight when necessary.

2. Temperance or Self-Control or Self-Denial meant doing what our human reason told us was necessary even when our lower natures were complaining that it was painful, tiring, too hot or too cold, boring, and so on. It meant keeping our desire for food, drink, sex, rest, and entertainment under control.

3. Prudence or Thoughtfulness meant that we thought about what we needed to do before we acted, instead of just acting on the blind impulse of the moment.

4. Justice or Right Balance meant keeping the three basic parts of our human psyche in the proper balance with one another: (a) Assertiveness and aggressiveness. (b) The need for food, drink, relaxation, time for fun, and so on. (c) Knowing how to think properly and clearly, without letting this turn into sterile rationalization and intellectualization, where all we did was ponder and talk without ever doing anything.

It was preserving the right kind of balance that produced the good life. We alcoholics got into trouble when we lost that sense of balance in any of these three basic areas, and started going to extremes:

(a) When we became too aggressive, or too cowardly.

(b) When we spent too much time relaxing and having fun, or tried to keep going past our limits without rest or time off.

(c) When we tried to turn everything into mind games and endless thinking and explaining things away, or when we went around acting on the impulse of the moment without ever thinking about the consequences of our actions.

To these four Cardinal Virtues (the heritage of the Greco-Roman pagan tradition), the middle ages added the three Theological Virtues, to make seven virtues in all. These three additional virtues played a major role in 1 Corinthians 13, a section from one of the Apostle Paul's letters which was extremely important in early A.A. thought.

5. Faith in Paul's thought did not mean belief in the correctness of some set of complex doctrines and dogmas. It meant simply a willingness to trust God.

6. Hope meant a willingness to move out into the unknown, taking things one day at a time, without worry or anxiety, leaving the future outcome in God's hands.

7. Love (as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7) was not an emotion or a feeling. It did not mean the same thing as "liking" someone. It was a way of acting toward other people. God did not tell us that we were supposed to like everyone. He DID ask us to treat everyone around us with love. If we look at the way Paul describes loving behavior, we will see that we can act that way even toward people whom we do not like.

"Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offense or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes."

