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ALCOHOLISM AS A DISEASE: A PERSONAL AND HISTORICAL REFLECTION

Brian Sunderman

Alcohol is an American ideology. We love our beer, wine, whiskey, vodka, tequila, rum, gin, and scotch. Personally, I was a vodka and whiskey aficionado. That's a lie. Aficionados appreciate all the finer points of whatever it is they are aficionado-ing about. I was not an aficionado. I was an alcoholic. I was caught in the downward spiral of alcoholism that included most of the medical problems now commonly associated with the disease. Even after a doctor's visit in December of 2018 where I was warned that my liver, kidneys, and heart were most likely about to go to war against me, I still couldn't shake the stuff. I would get the shakes within six hours of a last drink. It seemed as if I truly had the disease! In a strange turn of fate, in January of 2019, I decided to stop drinking. Unfortunately for me, I was one of those alcohol abusers in the most serious category: alcohol-dependent. This meant I was going to face withdrawal and possibly delirium tremens.

Delirium tremens was no joke. I hallucinated everything from talking trees to a Santa Claus whose sled was powered by the souls of the damned who lived in my air conditioning ducts. This seems silly to think about now, but at the time, it was all terrifyingly real in my head. After all was said and done and I came out the other side victorious over the demons, I had plenty of time to contemplate my experience combatting the disease. During this contemplation, I began to wonder about the history of alcoholism in the United States. Specifically, I was intrigued by the idea of alcoholism being a disease. Having known personally several alcoholics in my time, I was used to hearing about alcoholism being termed a disease, but now that I had an acute sense of awareness on the subject, I could not help but question; Was I really diseased?

During my brief stint in Alcoholics Anonymous, I noticed

several more experienced members say things along the lines of "alcoholism is now known to be a disease." This terminology seemed to imply that this had not always been the case when it came to labeling alcoholism. This paper serves as a record of my journey through the history of the term "alcoholism." I intend to prove that alcoholism is a new term, and was not used widely before the mid-1880s. Before this time, alcoholism was considered an effect, instead of a cause. I will also examine some of the "treatments" available for this disease in the nineteenth century.

From the get-go, I operated on the assumption that alcohol has been consumed in large quantities in America since before the founding, so I start all this off by stating that alcohol has been a factor in American life from at least 1776. Within the vast history of alcohol and alcoholism, this paper will focus on the terminology surrounding alcoholism as a disease. A further assumption upon which this paper rests is that ever since alcohol has existed, there have been problems with alcohol abuse. Alcohol abuse can be crime fueled by alcohol, deaths caused by alcohol, and so forth. As I searched through online databases, I noticed something peculiar. It seemed as if most scholarly research into alcoholism was

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related to the consequences of alcohol abuse, instead of the reasons behind the abuse. Exasperated, I turned to newspaper entries and searched for the term “alcoholism” and “alcoholic” in an attempt to find the earliest mention of the disease. My first hit came from a weekly publication in 1895 called *The Banner of Light*. Here, there featured a small blurb under the headline “ALCOHOLISM A DISEASE.”¹ The article quotes a Senator Lawrence of Berkshire County in Massachusetts, a former circuit judge who dealt with drunkards from all walks of life. According to the senator, “drunkenness at a certain stage becomes a disease, and every judge of a court realizes that confinement in jail accomplishes nothing. What is needed is medical treatment.”² This testimony from 1895 shows that some prominent individuals were already considering alcoholism a disease, and therefore curable by some medical means. In this particular article, the treatment for alcoholics is referred to as the “Keeley Treatment” and was considered “good in all cases where the patient really wishes to be cured.”³ Common understanding of disease would suggest that any disease susceptible to treatment is usually affected by said treatment regardless of the wishes of the patient. This testimony reveals that as early as the late nineteenth century, medical practitioners were developing an understanding of alcoholism as a treatable, but unique kind of disease. Dr. Leslie Keeley had studied medicine in Chicago before serving as a Union surgeon during the Civil War. Here, he first dealt with drunkenness on a regular basis—whiskey is liquid courage, after all. After the war, Dr. Keeley (with his amazing caterpillar-like mustache) was one among the first waves of American doctors to operate under the assumption that alcoholism was in fact a bodily disease and not a failing of the weak-willed. According to Keeley, there was “no difference in general terms between drunkenness or alcoholism and typhoid fever and insanity.”⁴ Further, Keeley believed that alcohol was “a poison that changed the cells of

the body, causing the disease of intoxication.”⁵ He went on to claim that “the weak will, vice, moral weakness, insanity, criminality, irreligion, and all are results of, and not causes of, inebriety.”⁶

Dr. Keeley was also apparently a bit of an entrepreneur, and in this respect, he took things one step further and peddled his own patented cure for alcoholism. He even claimed that his treatment, if “administered correctly, would end 95 percent of addictions.”⁷ Debuting in 1880, his Bichloride-of-Gold tonic cure for alcoholism was available to the general public through mail-order service. This tonic was meant to be injected into the arm of the ailing alcoholic and was guaranteed to cure the disease of alcoholism in as little as four doses! The injection was said to even leave a “reassuring gold stain”⁸ on the arm. In claiming the success of his treatment, Dr. Keeley asserted “I will take any liquor habitué there, saddened and saturated by twenty years of alcoholic debauch, sober him in two hours, cut short his worst spree in four hours, take him from inebriety to perfect sobriety without nervous shock or distress, and leave him antipathetic to alcoholic stimulants of every sort and kind inside of three days.”⁹ This was quite a claim, but as we can see from the 1895 article mentioned earlier, the Keeley Treatment was seemingly put to widespread and regular use with some semblance of overall positive results. This article suggests that the disease idea was becoming prevalent at the dawn of the twentieth century. By 1920, the question of alcohol had reached the federal government, as Congress passed the 18th amendment, also known as the Volstead Act, launching the Prohibition Era. The Temperance Movement was “grounded in the belief that alcohol is a dangerous drug – a poison – that threatens all who imbibe with physical, social, and moral harms.”¹⁰ Prohibition was eventually repealed in 1933 and viewed by both the general public and elected officials as an abysmal failure.

In 1935, shortly after the repeal of Prohibition, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith founded the world-famous organization, Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). As the story goes, Bill was inspired by a conversation with an alcoholic friend who had found the strength to stop drinking through a religious conversion. Shortly thereafter, Wilson, now sober, found himself in Akron, Ohio, tempted to get drunk after the failure of a business deal. Instead, he sought out another alcoholic, a surgeon named Bob Smith.¹¹ This meeting of the two alcoholics and their reliance on each other as inspiration to remain sober sparked the initial idea and led to the founding of A.A. Spreading outwards from Akron, A.A. became “the most successful self-help organization of our time.”¹² A.A. is based on a group therapy ideology grounded in a twelve-step program, and has been shown in repeated studies¹³ to be one of the most successful cures for the disease of alcoholism.

“ Much of the debate about the classification of alcoholism as a disease has been historically linked to the question of blame. Is the alcoholic to blame, or is the alcohol? ”

During the early years, “A.A. got a boost from the alcohol research program at Yale University under the leadership of biostatistician E. Morton Jellinek.”¹⁴ Dr. Jellinek had published two scientific articles about alcoholism, one of which lined up with the ideals found in A.A. Later, Dr. Jellinek published a book in which he “identified five varieties of alcoholism, designated by the Greek letters alpha through epsilon, of which two—gamma and delta— had sufficient indication of alcohol dependence or addiction to constitute a disease.”¹⁵ Then, in 1944, mostly in response to the studies on

alcoholism at Yale University, Mrs. Marty Mann founded the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism (now called National Council on Alcoholism). Mrs. Mann, who was the first woman to achieve sobriety through participation in A.A., stated that her specific goals were to “eliminate the stigma surrounding alcoholism, to educate the public that alcoholism was a disease and alcoholics were ‘sick,’ and to promote public support for helping alcoholics.”¹⁶ Thus, approaching the mid-twentieth century, multiple large-scale organizations were confidently labeling alcoholism a disease and devising treatments accordingly.

Others in the medical field have challenged the characterization of alcoholism as a disease. These challenges begin with the question of whether “alcoholism is properly labeled a disease,”¹⁷ and contend with the specifics of “loss of control, the possibility of returning to controlled drinking (with or without intervention), and whether and in what ways alcoholics are different.”¹⁸ One prominent critic of the disease label, Dr. Herbert Fingarette, believes that “alcoholics do not constitute a distinct group within the population of people that have problems with alcoholism.”¹⁹ According to Dr. Fingarette, a large part of the American population consumes alcohol at levels that would label them as heavy drinkers, and out of this heavy drinking group come many of the problems associated with heavy drinking. While these drinkers are not addicted, they do drink enough to suffer medical consequences brought on by their heavy drinking—but crucially, this is all by their choice. Much of the debate about the classification of alcoholism as a disease has been historically linked to the question of blame. Is the alcoholic to blame, or is the alcohol? The ideas of choice and will power are key here. Usually, choice and will power have no effect when it comes to disease in the common sense. If alcoholism is to be truly thought of as a disease, it is counterintuitive to think of “curing” the disease, if the patient

has the power to regress back into the disease by the choice of drinking alcohol again. Therefore, it is logical to claim that alcoholism is in fact a behavioral issue arising from the abuse of an addictive substance, and not a disease.

Dr. George Valliant, research psychiatrist at Harvard and a leading proponent of the disease argument, has proposed the idea that “uncontrolled, maladaptive ingestion of alcohol is not a disease in the sense of biological disorder; rather, alcoholism is a disorder of behavior” and that “alcohol dependence lies on a continuum and that in scientific terms behavior disorder will often be a happier semantic choice than disease.”²⁰ Valliant goes on to say, “Calling alcoholism a disease, rather than a behavior disorder, is a useful device both to persuade the alcoholic to admit his alcoholism and to provide a ticket for admission into the health care system.”²¹ This suggests that alcoholism can be labeled as a kind of curable disease, though not a disease in the classic sense as caused by some virus or bacteria. So then why the fuss over the question of labeling alcoholism a disease rather than a behavioral disorder? According to Dr. Philip Cook, a sociologist at Duke University, “The disease label may help remove the stigma from alcoholism, since it suggests that the alcoholic has lost volition and hence is no longer blameworthy for all the damage he does to his family and community.”²² This reveals that the label of alcoholism as a disease (or not) is closely linked to ideas of blame and morality.

Alcohol has been an important part (for better and for worse) of American society since before the nation’s founding. This means that alcohol abuse has been an issue for as long as alcohol has been manufactured. Around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, newspapers show that doctors and prominent individuals were starting to consider the abuse of alcohol a disease, and to be potentially curable. During

this time period, the potential cures were mostly opiate filled snake oil tonic elixirs sold by travelling salesmen claiming to be medical miracle workers. By the 1920s, the federal government was involved in attempts to address alcohol abuse, passing the Prohibition Era laws that would also eventually fail to cure the problem.²³ Following the federal government’s involvement, two former alcoholics pioneered the use of group therapy and self-help techniques, which operated from the assumption that alcoholism was a disease. These techniques proved to be some of the most successful treatments for alcoholism yet discovered. By the 1940s, scientific papers were confirming the success of applying the A.A. doctrine in the fight against alcoholism in America.²⁴

Amidst the rise of modern medicine in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is persistent debate in the medical community as to whether alcoholism is a disease or a behavioral disorder. As neurologist and psychiatrist Dr. Vladimir Hudolin says, “Although alcoholism has recently come to be recognized as a disease, this recognition has not resulted in comprehensive, national, control programs. Moreover, the very concept of mental disease, emotional disturbance, and behavior disorder has become unclear.”²⁵ It sort of seems like the more we learn about alcoholism the more difficult it is to classify it one way or another. As the sociologist Dr. Cook has said, “The belief that alcoholism is in some important sense a disease spawns the hope that medical research can discover its causes, identify those who are most susceptible, and develop effective treatments.”²⁶ Since appearing in the public sphere in the late nineteenth century, the concept of alcoholism as a disease has been taken up by many prominent and influential organizations focused on treatment and cure. Yet many in the medical community still challenge the label, raising complex questions about blame, morality, choice, and will when it comes to disease.

As for me, I count myself lucky. I have so far, in over two years of sobriety, not experienced the cravings or relapses so commonly reported by alcoholics. After my research into alcoholism as a disease, I'm not sure if I was ever truly "diseased" or just drank way too much, becoming addicted like one becomes to cigarettes and other substances. I would posit that my experience in questioning my own label as diseased or not serves as a window into the greater issue in

medical society at large. It seems that the experts are not really sure about classifying alcoholism a disease or not. The only thing they can agree upon is research into ways to help cure those afflicted with alcoholism. I suppose in the end it does not really matter if alcoholism is labeled a disease or a behavioral issue. What matters is the hope that those who suffer from alcoholism can be helped to overcome their problems as related to alcohol consumption.

ENDNOTES

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