



## Galanter, M. What is Alcoholics Anonymous? A Path from Addiction to Recovery

Thomas F. McGovern EdD & William L. White MA

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## BOOK REVIEW

Galanter, M. (2016). *What is Alcoholics Anonymous? A Path from Addiction to Recovery*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 255pp., \$29.95 (soft cover), ISBN 978-0-19-027656-0.

Since its founding in 1935, the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has been subjected to considerable scrutiny, praise, and criticism within public, professional, and scientific forums. Hundreds of books and thousands of articles have been written on AA spanning its history, biographies of its founding leaders, member autobiographies, professional interpretations of its 12-Step program of alcoholism recovery, the integration of AA principles and practices within professionally directed addiction treatment, and recent scientific studies of AA's effectiveness and "active ingredients." Although quite contentious debates about the effectiveness of AA and the larger "12-Step Movement" rage in popular social media venues, there have been marked advances in the methodological rigor of scientific studies of AA (Humphreys, Blodgett & Wagner, 2014; Humphreys et al, 2004; Kaskutas, 2009; Kelly, 2013; Kelly & Yeterian, 2012). Given this voluminous body of formal and grey literature and its daily growth, it is difficult to separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff when it comes to understanding AA's place in recovery from alcohol dependence. Dr. Marc Galanter's latest contribution achieves this in a number of noteworthy ways.

*What is Alcoholics Anonymous?* is organized into three engaging and highly readable sections. The first explores the history of AA, AA-related controversies, and the story of how Dr. Galanter came to be involved in professional studies of 12-Step programs. The second section elucidates the AA experience through discussions of AA engagement, AA's 12 Steps, AA sponsorship, and spiritual awakenings within AA. The final section of *What is Alcoholics Anonymous?* reviews the role of AA in the practice addiction treatment, highlights new research on the neurobiology of AA participation, discusses scientific studies of AA effectiveness, and closes with a review of alternatives to AA.

One must admire the way in which Dr. Marc Galanter respects "the personal and unique ways persons experience their problems and recovery" (p. xii). He allows AA to speak in its own voice and in its own terms. In a telling fashion, he notes that AA "does not usurp the autonomy of its members" (p. 55). The process of transformation resulting from working the 12 Steps is elegantly captured in this book and the descriptions of the spiritual dimensions of recovery, from a variety of perspectives is outstanding. The attitudes of health care professionals to the treatment of addictions in its ideal form is described as "peer reviewed research with technical celeste." With delightful wit he describes the treatment of persons with alcohol and other drug problems as "difficult clinical situations." With admirable even handedness he traces the involvement of physicians and other health care professionals in the treatment of addictions. In looking to the future he wonders if "the volunteerism established in AA can be extended so that 12 step members can provide a protective environment without a professional driven format" (p. 153). This challenging insight deserves the fullest investigation in meeting the individual, community, and societal suffering associated with addictions. This is especially important in the development of community involvement in on going recovery

initiatives (Best, Irving, Collinson, Anderson, & Edwards, 2017). These are a few of the many pearls of wisdom found in this text.

There are many things that separates Dr. Marc Galanter's just-released *What is Alcoholics Anonymous?* from the larger body of AA literature and popular discourse on AA. This is one of the few available texts that skillfully integrates recent scientific studies of AA, direct clinical experience in the treatment of addiction, and vivid personal accounts of varied styles and outcomes of AA participation. We know of no other text that breaks new ground (e.g., the neurobiology of AA participation) while offering deep insights into AA's Steps, AA meeting rituals, AA sponsorship, AA-oriented addiction treatment, and AA alternatives—all illustrated by the voices of Dr. Galanter's patients and research participants. *What is Alcoholics Anonymous?* escapes the stale pro-AA and anti-AA polemics of recent years and instead conveys the author's knowledge and experience in a most engaging style—a sage elder sharing what he has learned about AA in his work as an addiction psychiatrist over the span of a half century.

Amid all the conflicting rhetoric about AA, it is a pleasure to read a book free of blind devotion and equally blind vitriol that offers instead page after page of valuable insights into the growing varieties of recovery—and AA—experience. *What is Alcoholics Anonymous?* will find highly appreciative audiences among individuals seeking escape from alcohol-related problems, affected family members, and a wide range of helping professionals, particularly those working on the frontlines of addiction treatment and the delivery of posttreatment recovery support services.

Thomas F. McGovern, EdD

*Department of Psychiatry, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center  
Lubbock, Texas, USA*

William L. White, MA

*Chestnut Health Systems, Punta Gorda, Florida, USA*

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