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Journal Item

How to cite:

Shand, John (2004). Colin Wilson: Thought Against Defeat. The Philosophers' Magazine(25) pp. 48–49.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.5840/tpm200425117>

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COLIN WILSON: THE JOYFUL PHILOSOPHER

by John Shand

When Colin Wilson was 16 he wanted to commit suicide. His life's work could be seen as a philosophical answer as to why one shouldn't. It is about how not to be defeated by thoughts of our certain extinction, that nothing we do really matters and that we may as well be dead.

Wilson has worked outside philosophical academia and has been neglected and unstudied within it. Yet a surprising number of people found in him the inspiration to take up the study of philosophy. He is not without admirers within the philosophy profession as well as outside it. According to Stephen Clark, professor of philosophy at the University of Liverpool, "Wilson does have some interesting ideas about attention, inattention and boredom. Indeed I don't know any other philosopher who has had more to say about that very philosophical disease." Robert Solomon, distinguished teaching professor at the University of Texas at Austin says, "Colin Wilson has always seemed to me a distant kindred spirit." Admiration for Wilson's independence of mind and erudition has also been expressed by Roger Scruton.

In 1956, at the age of only 25, Wilson published a book, *The Outsider*, which made him famous virtually overnight. *The Outsider*, and the sequence of related books that followed it, is summated in *The New Existentialism*. They set out to solve what Wilson saw as defeatism about life. "Existentialism starts from Kierkegaard's statement: What am I doing here? Who put me here? What am I supposed to do now I'm here? Take me to the director!" Wilson asks why we should not be joyous and affirm life. It is intuitively obvious, an intuition that philosophy ignores, that we often know perfectly well that our life is meaningful and know what we should do. We know this when we make something beautiful or well, fall in love, have sex, wake with "spring-morning consciousness", have a loved child returned we thought lost, listen to music, or are redeemed from something we thought awful and inevitable.

In the fifties and sixties, the popular image of existentialism, personified in Sartre and Camus, was of a supposedly wise self-awareness of the futility of things. Only lesser spirits, pitiful self-deceivers, went on as if things they did mattered. Only the insensitive or stupid find the world bathed in meaning and value. Wilson explored this pessimistic, supposedly authentic but world-weary, modern hero as he appeared in literature and twentieth-century culture. He argued that this is not just a local problem peculiar to existentialism, but one that takes the human condition a certain way.

The key to Wilson's thought is that we are led to nihilism by a fundamental philosophical mistake. That mistake is not to examine our minds, consciousness, *first* before we judge what the world is like and address the problem of values. The kernel here, as it was for Sartre, is Husserl's scientific objective phenomenology. But Wilson takes Husserl in quite another direction to Sartre. This culminates in a new positive existential phenomenology: the study of the structure of our conscious awareness, one that shows how nihilism may be overcome. "Nietzsche is the only great philosopher I can think of who actually got through the dogged stoicism and managed to rebound completely from total nihilism into a sense of total optimism," says Wilson.

“That is why Nietzsche still seems to me to be the most important philosopher ever.”

A further mistake of philosophy is that it does not deal with the total range of experience and dismisses some as non-veridical, in an “attempt to close philosophy, close it completely, and only have the pigeonholes it is supposed to have.” But “as Whitehead said, you have to take into account consciousness drunk and consciousness sober, consciousness poetic and consciousness non-poetic.” In fact “philosophy begins with glimpses, intuitions, visions, before language can do its work”. These are glimpses of a wider reality, an Olympian or “bird’s-eye view”, rather than our everyday narrow “worm’s-eye” view. “Philosophy does the same kind of good to people as all wider glimpses do: they snap you out of subjectivity into objectivity.”

Wilson identifies seven levels in his phenomenological analysis of the structure of consciousness. These go from unconscious sleep to an inarticulate mystical state, triggered by the spark of a peak experience, where the world seems marvellous and suffused with point and meaning. This is not a process of egocentric navel-gazing, but just the opposite; it is a forgetfulness of self, a clearing away of foggy subjectivity that blocks us from the real world. What we have to do is learn how to push consciousness up in intensity: “The main problem of human consciousness is leakage.”

The reason we think such transient “peak experiences” can’t and shouldn’t be sustained is that we have uncritically accepted that “normal” mundane living on auto-pilot (Wilson calls it the “robot view”) gives us the authentic view of reality. The “peak experiences” are then seen as delusional aberrations, at best welcome escapes from the mundane, but ultimately distorting what the world is really like. But that the peak states present a distorted view, as opposed to the mundane view, is simply an ungrounded assumption.

One might question whether what we are considering is merely a mental trick. For Wilson, states of heightened consciousness give us the true view of reality. As he puts it, “Intensity of consciousness equals objectivity.” There is no reason to assume that the dire world is the real world, for it only picks out one sort of experience of the world. Wilson’s argument is that properly understood our higher states of awareness and attitudes are the ones that give us a truer view of reality because they encompass a wider range of our experiences. In these states we feel that we are leaving behind much of the narrow inner world infected with the distorting baggage of subjective consciousness, clearing the glass, and looking at things as they really are, where the “I” ceases to matter.

The question then might arise as to why we should regard the world as perceived in this way as authentic. The first response is to point out that when the world appears like this we are phenomenologically absolutely convinced of its truth, that it is strongly self-authenticating. The higher states of consciousness not only reveal reality, they include in themselves the insight that the lower states are false, pernicious and unnecessary. The second is that if there is no “innocent-eye”, this suggests that the meaningful world has at least as much right to be called authentic as the meaningless world. Indeed, cynically, if there are no values as the nihilists would suggest, then what is the value of living in a meaningless world if one does not have to?

This would be so much theoretical to and fro were it not to have consequences as to how we should live. Wilson's life indicates what can be done through taking one's consciousness in-hand and through self-discipline refuse to sink into torpid despair at the vicissitudes of life. "Our purpose in life is that we don't allow ourselves to be defeated by testing experiences." Wilson has worked for fifty years without the handy financial and ego-enhancing props of regular academia, and survived the turbulence and vagaries of fashion; getting up every day at six and writing daily for hours productively in most literary genres. To date he has written 115 books.

It's not as if Wilson doesn't know what a soul-searing sense of emptiness and meaningless is like - he himself calls such feelings "vastations". His full awareness of the dark-side into which we can descend makes his achievements all the more remarkable and convincing. In this sense his autobiography and personal character are concrete evidence of his philosophy. Philosophy must be intertwined with what we do. "You want to know about my ideas and I'll tell you about my life," he says.

Wilson thinks rather little of much of contemporary professional academic philosophy, whether it be the analytical tradition which takes for granted the range of experiences that philosophy is obliged to address, or the frivolous game that is the intellectual nihilism of postmodernism. Wilson does accept that philosophy has improved, and is now more comfortable with existential phenomenology. Wilson's view is that for any philosopher to be less blinkered probably "involves a fairly unpleasant experience, perhaps to the point of suicide." Indeed philosophers who have been through such a process "are the most interesting".

Within philosophy there are notable exceptions to the mainstream of those who start in the wrong place: Husserl, Nietzsche and Whitehead, that latter two of whom were convinced that philosophy must encompass the full range of our experiences, not just an arbitrary corner of them. "Wittgenstein was in the practical sense an existentialist," claims Wilson. "He himself didn't understand what he was all about."

What Wilson proposes is a kind of evolution of human sensibility, which comes not from religion or even from art but from a new phenomenology of consciousness that reveals to us what we are capable of. "Philosophy is the attempt to understand the universe, " he says, "everything there is, and to be supremely, totally, objective." This objectivity is not reducible to science alone but is a matter for philosophy because "when you know that the objective universe is illuminated by consciousness, then you know that your starting point has to be your own self, your own consciousness. Heidegger talked about the triviality of everydayness, but also about our trouble of forgetfulness of existence. Our real job as philosophers is, as it were, to remember existence completely. What Heidegger is really saying is truth is objectivity."

Suggested reading

The Outsider (Orion)

The New Existentialism (Wildwood House).

Below the Iceberg: Anti-Sartre and Other Essays (Paupers' Press).

Dreaming to Some Purpose (Random House), his autobiography, will be published spring 2004.

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