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Man isn't small - he's just lazy

10-13 minutes

'Man is not small - he's just bloody lazy!'

Interview with Colin Wilson by Juliette Brodsky,

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On a visit to Australia, Colin Wilson – author of prophetic bestsellers *The Outsider* and *The Occult* – spoke with NEXT's Juliette Brodsky about his views on humanity in the late 20th century.

Humanity is on the brink of an evolutionary leap, or it would be if we would only wake up to ourselves and the endless possibilities within our imaginations.

This is a problem which has teased the minds of numerous thinkers and writers, but few more so than prolific British author Colin Wilson.

Throughout his ninety-odd books on philosophy, the occult, crime, astronomy and music, Wilson has explored the same obsessive theme: the paradoxical nature of freedom and humanity's seeming inability to grasp its essence and convert it to reality. Most of us do experience Christmas morning-like moments of great wonder and intensity when freedom is at once

vivid and self-evident. The trouble, Wilson argues, is our habitual narrowness of consciousness – it lulls us into a permanent state of drowsiness and torpidity, so that with the exception of moments of crisis, we rarely attempt to stretch our powers to their limits. This in turn causes a general stagnant sense of the futility of life and everyday living, as though we suffer a perpetual form of metaphysical head-cold.

Wilson's first book *The Outsider*, published in 1956 when he was 24, set out to examine the problems of alienation, creativity and the modern mind by profiling artists, musicians and writers of the last three centuries. He was fascinated then, as always, by how so many gifted people came to commit suicide in such large numbers when it seemed they were on the brink of discovering enormous vistas of potent beauty and interest.

“Something very strange happened in the 18th century: suddenly people began reading novels and taking off on a magic carpet ride of imagination as a way of satisfying desires that could not be satisfied in ordinary life. And as soon as they learned to do this, they began to enter completely new realms. It's what produced all those suicides in the 19th century – they were having ecstatic moments of insight, and then finding themselves in states of misery and exhaustion which they didn't understand. And it's true for us too. We do get tired and overwhelmed, and feel that everything is meaningless and that it's almost impossible to recharge our vital batteries. A nervous breakdown poses the fundamental problem of human existence; it appears to tell us that life is suffocating and pointless, but behind it lies the feel which everybody knows when faced with a crisis of any sort – that life is infinitely rich and full of possibilities.”

But how to tell which experience is the more genuine? When existentialists asked this question, they came to the conclusion that life is generally one weary, plodding bore and that moments of happiness and heightened perception were simply illusion. Wilson has always disagreed with this premise.

“From the beginning, what I tried to do was create an optimistic philosophy which is based upon the reality of those peculiar moments of ecstatic insight, and the question of how we can get back to them often enough, until we can find our way there sufficiently frequently to be sure they’re real and not an illusion.”

Almost alone in his generation of Angry Young Men (Wilson remarks that he has little, temperamentally or creatively, in common with his contemporaries John Osborne and Jean Paul Sartre), Wilson anticipated people’s increasing urgency for a sense of the beyond, their quest for vision as opposed to the merely economic considerations that currently dominate our existence. His books, combining meticulous research and lucid, entertaining interplay of ideas, resonated with people of all ages during the last half century, and continue to do so, despite the occasional complaints by critics of the Marxist persuasion.

Colin Wilson, eloquent and vigorous in tweed suit, is firm in his belief that it’s up to the media and intellectuals in every field to drop their assumptions of gloom about the human condition.

“If, say, a scientist could invent an amplifier for the imagination which you could stick on your head like a Walkman and which instantly turned up the power of the imagination threefold, we’d have solved the problems of boredom and

meaninglessness. The human race would instantly become supermen. As soon as the writers and intellectuals (which our education system rarely questions) realise this and begin doing their job properly and using their powers of analysis, then everything would begin to change.”

But is it possible to achieve this when in the 1990s, people are already having their imaginations catered to by all kinds of visual and technological goodies, which could be said to be engendering less discipline and more flabbiness of intellect?

“Well, it depends. There will always be a vast majority that doesn’t want to think anyway. Fortunately, though, there seems to be a savage appetite for thinking in just a few people, and these are the ones I call ‘outsiders’. They can be in a perfectly comfortable situation, and yet they have the desire to make themselves uncomfortable. They’re saying that ‘what I want is different, a real control over myself which I have glimpsed in moments of intensity’ – they have an absolute craving to do something in themselves that will get rid of muck in their inner being until they feel clean. These are the ones who will always be the driving force behind this civilisation.

“My job as a writer is to clear away some of the muck for them, to get down there with a shovel, so that they can begin to see how they can do it. Provided that this dominant 5% who discuss and share their appetite for ideas and life are healthy and cheerful, then it gets passed on, leading to a better civilisation.”

Wilson is intrigued by the boom in New Age practices such as reincarnation and channelling, although he takes them with a

large pinch of salt, saying such movements are wont to occur towards the end of every century. It's quite healthy in his opinion, however, because it presages a basic change in our thinking – ideas which he's explored in *The Occult*, *The Philosopher's Stone* and *Religion and the Rebel*. He has never been a strong advocate of Christianity, seeking instead to construct the bare necessities of religion – the absolute essential framework.

“The collapse of Christianity began in the time of Galileo. You could see why people like Voltaire wanted to tear the Church fathers down once and for all – because they were such absolute bastards. The mistake, however, that the Voltaires make is that they tear down religion and leave nothing in its place. For them, life is savagely meaningless, a series of separate disastrous instants. What we've lost in religion is tremendously important – that pervasive sense of purpose which we should be able to regain without having to swallow all that nonsense about Jesus dying on the cross to save our sins.”

More interesting to Wilson is the much-documented breaking-down of barriers between science and metaphysics, heralded by the advent of chaos theory, quantum mechanics, Karl Popper's study of the evolution of the human brain and even biologist Julian Huxley (an old sparring partner of Wilson's) who declared that man has become the managing director of evolution in the universe.

“They're realising now that Darwin was not entirely right, that there is such a thing as the inheritance of acquired characteristics. This is important, because if we can pass on to our offspring some new kind of knowledge, so that they're

already born with a deeper sense of the significance of things, then we could see humanity evolve at a tremendous pace. Just as the wheel is the extension of the human foot so you can go faster, and the telescope is an extension of the human eye so you can see further, so too, through computers, Virtual Reality and whatnot, we can improvise new extensions for the brain.

“Of course, many are saying that they can’t quite keep up with all this. But as soon as we recognise that what appears to be an inconvenience is in fact something which enables us to do things better, then we begin to glimpse the vast potentials of life in the next hundred years.”

The real issue of the future however won’t be new forms of time and brain-saving electronic devices. It has got to be, as Wilson sees it, the strengthening of the human spirit, so that it’s capable of responsibly handling the things it creates.

“I think the only way we can become less defeat-prone and less inclined to make an emotional mess of things is by pushing ourselves slightly beyond our normal limits. Now we know this instinctively: cows need trees to rub against because they don’t have hands to scratch themselves. Snakes need stones to rub against so that they can slough their skins. We have this instinctive feeling that we need something hard to rub against, if we’re going to improve our souls. And this, of course, is the reason we keep creating wars – somehow we want something really difficult which rouses us. The trouble is that even war cannot frighten us enough. It’s no longer a hard enough stone, although it should be. Nor are drugs the answer. But we experience crime, war and drug abuse because people have no

way to express their dominance, and they haven't yet learned to channel it through the realms of the mind.

“Drugs can make us aware of the universe's immensity. As I said in my postscript to *The Outsider*, they can plunge you into a delightful world of twilight where you become aware of the strange fish that inhabit your subconscious. But you become a drifter, helpless and defenceless. We need to get the sense of deep vision, the connection with the deeper sources of one's vital powers, without the disadvantages that drugs of all descriptions pose.

“If we learn to use our imaginations to a sufficient extent, to flex the muscles of the mind and will, then quite suddenly you cease to need artificial stimuli and you begin to learn to do it by yourself. I explain how, in most of my books. And even though I'm by no means the flavour of the month in England, there are people all over the world who believe, like me, that we're on the brink of making some discovery that will be the turning point in human history.”

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