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Philosophy

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The foundations of Wilson's philosophy, his 'new existentialism', were developed over a decade from 1956 to 1966. Fundamentally preoccupied with the radical techniques of phenomenology as developed by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, Wilson aimed to shed existentialism of it's pessimistic glamour and outline a 'lived philosophy' in language accessible to all.

The Outsider may be Wilson's best known book, but it is far too often discussed in isolation with the second volume, *Religion and the Rebel* (1957) usually only mentioned as a critical flop, rather than a further investigation into existentialism which still reads well in the present century. (The Japanese got the continuity when they titled the second volume 'Outsider Part Two'). The remaining texts of the 'Outsider Cycle' – *The Age of Defeat* (1959), *The Strength to Dream: Literature and the Imagination* (1961), *Origins of the Sexual Impulse* (1963) and *Beyond the Outsider: The Philosophy of the Future* (1965) – are rarely noted, let alone actively discussed even by the intellectual English speaking media, which has concentrated on Wilson's brief flash with celebrity instead.

Working in what he described as a vacuum in the immediate post-*Outsider* period, Wilson developed his "foundation work" through these six volumes and summed it up in a seventh

entitled *Introduction to the New Existentialism* in 1966. Reissued as a paperback in 1980, the blurb on the rear cover stated that the new existentialism would "provide twentieth and twenty-first century man with a relevant and satisfying philosophy". As far as the twentieth century is concerned, the new existentialism was eclipsed by Jacques Derrida's anti-technique of deconstruction, as presented at John Hopkins University in 1966. Yet Wilson was also lecturing to enthusiastic audiences on American campuses (and occasionally, prisons and science fiction conferences) at this time, offering a phenomenology concerned with analysing the kind of philosophical language which was "adulterated with preconceptions and fallacies" as noted at the end of his *Beyond the Outsider.* It is almost as if two diametrically opposed philosophies, both with similar roots, were blossoming at the same time. But Wilson's dynamic take on phenomenology has lain underground for decades whereas Derrida's interpretation is now a tiresomely grinding cog in the controlling state apparatus known as critical theory.

If the twentieth century ignored Wilson's take on Husserl (in the Anglosphere that is, not in Japan, Russia or various Middle Eastern territories where Wilson holds critically respectability) then perhaps the new existentialism will provide this century "with a relevant and satisfying philosophy". One scholar certainly thinks so. He writes that Wilson "remains particularly relevant today, if not more so. Not only hermeneutically in our modern age where – while post-post modernism is now in it's death throes – we are encountering the object-based mantra of Speculative Realism, whereby no transcendental ego is deemed feasible as pre-existing objects themselves induce meaning perception". Although Wilson anticipated their gimmick of using

H. P. Lovecraft as a philosophical inspiration by about half a century, he would have rejected this idea that we must rely on objects for meaning by pointing to Monsieur Fasquelle in Sartre's debut novel, *Nausea* – "when his cafe empties, his head empties too".

Intentionality is the key

Edmund Husserl

Edmund Husserl once spoke of the "muddy" nature of philosophy which he wished to replace with a rigorously scientific "method and a discipline". With the publication of his two volume *Logical Investigations* at the very start of the twentieth century, this would be known as *phenomenology*. (With typical brevity and clarity, Wilson describes this "muddy" state in 'The Strange Story of Modern Philosophy', originally the second chapter in *Beyond the Outsider*, later reprinted in *The Essential Colin Wilson*). Phenomenology in the modern, Husserlian sense is the analysis of how consciousness perceives objects. Drawing from his teacher Franz Brentano, Husserl – originally a mathematician – tightened Brentano's

notion of ‘intentionality’. For Brentano, thought is always ‘about’ something; it encloses it’s object as a fruit encloses it’s stone, so observation of this ‘enclosing’ activity should be paramount: before we philosophise, we should check, in Wilson’s words, the “instrument of consciousness”. Husserl would apply and expand this concept of intentionality, carefully assessing how consciousness selects (and distorts). For Wilson, the primary importance of this is that consciousness interacts with the environment, it works “as a kind of hand, grasping objects within it’s continuum”.

Wilson’s ‘new’ existentialism is his convenient label for ‘phenomenological existentialism’ and it is concerned with the vigorous practicalities of Husserl’s technique – the analysis of consciousness – rather than merely debating terminology. “The question in which Husserl was basically interested” wrote Wilson in *Beyond the Outsider*, “was: Why does the consciousness select in a certain manner? True to his scientific approach, Husserl did not propound the question in these terms. According to the scientific method, ‘Why?’ often demands an unnecessary amount of theorising, but ‘How?’ can be observed by anyone who goes to enough trouble.” Wilson would stress that phenomenology is “not a philosophy; it is a philosophical method, a *tool*. It is like an adjustable spanner that can be used for dismantling a refrigerator or a car, or used for hammering in nails, or even for knocking somebody out”. Phenomenology, or ‘the study of the structure of consciousness’ is an active method which depends on Husserl’s notion of intentionality. By studying the image below, we can make use of intentionality. Like flipping a coin, we can choose to see either two profiles or a vase.

Intentionality is selectivity in perception. We can see either the vase or the faces but not both images simultaneously; Wilson describes this activity of intentionality as “the central concept of phenomenology”. He also refers to this selectivity as ‘prejudice’, our curious ability to select certain things and discard others, to enable our preconceptions and attitudes to shape our reception of the world. “It was Husserl who pointed out the simple mistake that had kept philosophy at a standstill for two hundred years” writes Wilson in *Introduction to the New Existentialism*. Descartes proclaimed he was doubting everything yet he left his own perceptual prejudices unquestioned. Wilson goes on to compare Descartes’ method to a detective in a drawing room full of suspects; he doubts each suspect and weighs up the evidence. But Husserl “has suggested a new and most disturbing possibility” – what if the detective himself is the murderer? Philosophers since Descartes have been making assumptions about the innocence of the *cogito* and were blissfully unaware of the distorting prejudices within their own consciousnesses. Husserl’s “new and most disturbing possibility” is the technique of the ‘new’ or phenomenological existentialism, the development of a faculty which can understand these distortions by studying intentionality. “All this is to say”, continues Wilson, “that intentionality is applied to acts that we suppose to be mechanical and that we actually cause

ourselves". Perception is intentional, like an archer firing an arrow at a target. Descartes thought of consciousness as a flat reflecting surface, yet a more accurate simile would be of a distorting fairground mirror or a complex mirrored system of lenses, refractors and prisms. Phenomenology studies these distortions first rather than merely making judgements and naively presuming consciousness to be trustworthy or an unprejudiced innocent, a plane mirror. Husserl called this naive state the natural standpoint or natural attitude; a kind of perceptual habit of taking things for granted which is familiar to us all. Life is mostly habitual – "and phenomenological analysis reveals a new depth of meaning in this commonplace assertion" says Wilson. The selectivity (intentionality) of perception is a kind of shorthand method of understanding the world. "Attention has to be economised, and so attention works on the same principle of language. Language takes a piece of knowledge and turns it into symbols and formulae, so that it can be stored and handled more conveniently. Consciousness treats the physical world in the same way; it does not bother to examine each object; it writes down it's formula." A familiar object seen or photographed from an unfamiliar angle baffles the selective faculty as it offers information usually excluded from the habitual 'prejudiced' process.

It all sounds unnecessarily abstract, but as Wilson said, this "can be observed by anyone who goes to enough trouble". Husserl developed a technique for catching out the 'natural attitude' which he labelled the 'phenomenological reduction' (also known as 'bracketing' or the *epochē*). This involves looking at objects and things as neutrally as possible – 'bracketing out' any subjective feelings or prior knowledge and attempting to

suspend judgement, or to see without prejudice – to experience pure phenomena. By disconnecting our attention from the object, Wilson notes, we can "outwit the natural standpoint" by treating whatever is under examination as completely alien. The *epochē*, properly performed, suspends us in a state of radical detachment, the opposite of the habitual or naive attitude which takes everything as given.

Habits, Robots and Thresholds

In *Experience and Judgement* (1938) Husserl speaks of "habitual sedimentations". Wilson used a technological term, 'the robot' to refer to layers of habitual intentions. When I drive or type I appear to do it almost effortlessly, but these processes were slowly and clumsily learned and they eventually became habits – Wilson remarks that these habits are intentions which, through repetitive practice, have become "mechanical intentions". Because I am no longer painfully aware of them and they function quietly in the background, they appear to be mechanisms. But no: although they are *now* mechanical, they were still intentions – they were created intentionally. The robot is a convenient symbol for this process; it is a kind of automatic servant buried deep inside us and it picks up all the repetitive and boring tasks we do not need to be constantly aware of performing. Unfortunately it is somewhat over zealous and often interferes with things of which we *would* rather be fully aware – such as listening to a favourite piece of music – yet finding it overtly familiar, or feeling underwhelmed or disappointed by a long anticipated holiday. The robot is utterly essential but has it's own habit of fading and erasing newness or freshness in our experience. It homogenises too much of our lives due to it's sheer relentless efficiency.

Wilson opines that phenomenology is the “examination of the robot” and that this discipline enables us to “re-excavate these habits and realise them as lived intentions. This, in turn, takes away our boredom, our tendency to let familiarity breed contempt”. This archeology of “habitual sedimentations” could dig through the surface layers – what we think of as our everyday selves – through the layer of acquired habits such as reading and writing, and then further down into the depths which are “the mental equivalents of the Miocene, the Jurassic, the Carboniferous”. We rarely come into contact with such atavistic levels, but they are there. Discussing William James’ observations on these slumbering forces, Wilson comments that “what we are dealing with here are underground energies, invisible reserves way below the surface of our conscious awareness”. These are generally inaccessible to our ‘everyday’ state of mind, yet a crisis can bring them to the surface – and oddly enough, can do so in a dramatic fashion which pleasant circumstances usually cannot. Wilson imagines a kind of plimsoll line or a margin in consciousness which we cross when an unpleasant experience suddenly makes us happy or even ecstatic when we least expect to be. He has labelled this paradox the ‘St. Neots Margin’ (after the place he was travelling though when he realised the insight) the ‘indifference threshold’, or more technically, a “tax on consciousness” and with reference to A. N. Whitehead, the “law of entropy in prehension” (prehension – from the Latin *prehensio*, or ‘to seize’ – is essentially what Husserl’s teacher Brentano meant by intentionality). Wilson presents many examples of this paradox in action, such as two well known incidents involving the young Nietzsche which are discussed in the ‘Pain Threshold’ chapter of *The Outsider* and Proust’s famous ‘peak experience’ from

Swann's Way where although thoroughly tired and depressed, he vividly remembers his past in drastically vivid detail.

The paradox of this threshold or margin is that it can only be stimulated by discomfort, crisis or something worse – a pleasant situation, oddly enough, bores us quickly. Yet this is an absurdity. We should be able to rouse these "invisible reserves" at any time, not wait for a random crisis to force them over the threshold. In his *New Pathways in Psychology: Maslow and the Post-Freudian Revolution* (1971), Wilson noted that "consciousness without crisis tends to become negative". (It can also be said that the indifference threshold "is the extent to which the vitality is asleep").

This is Wilson's observation of the "paradox of human freedom'. We obsess over freedom, yet settled civilisation bores us as we take it for granted. Does this mean we must seek out danger in order to shake ourselves awake? Wilson's study of 'outsiders' doing just that seems to suggest not, and his classification of violence and deviant activity in books such as *A Criminal History of Mankind* (1984) lays out a firm case against it. James' subterranean energies already exist below the threshold and with careful practice of intentional disciples (phenomenology) they can be brought to the surface of conscious awareness so we can "realise them as lived intentions". It is a realisation, the observation and understanding of something which is already there, but obscured by our habits, not crude attempts, shortcuts or waiting for negative situations to manufacture this awareness.

Because of our habit of presuming that our consciousness is passive, the world seems mute or blank; it appears "to be poker-

faced when interrogated" says Wilson. But "Husserl has shown that my consciousness is not as static as I thought, and the poker faced world is not the real world at all, but a world of symbols. The world seems to be wearing a mask, and my mind seems to confront it helplessly; then I discover that my consciousness is a cheat, a double agent. It carefully fixed the mask on reality, then presented to know nothing about it". The title of a chapter in *Introduction to the New Existentialism* sums this up: 'Everyday Consciousness is a Liar'.

Husserl's method – "the description of consciousness and the way it appends the world" – gives existentialism a truly scientific method to combat these lies, according to Wilson. More of a radical lived philosophy than the autobiographical rambling existentialism is commonly supposed to be, the potency of the phenomenological method was lost on quite a few of it's original adherents. Sartre could feel like a 'precision machine' but his view of consciousness as an emptiness precluded any true analysis of such a state. Heidegger's views on authentic and inauthentic existence – say, reading the poetry of Hölderlin versus self-indulgent gossip – fails to see the difference of degree of intentionality in each activity. The intentional focus used by Mozart when writing his last three symphonies in six weeks, for instance, "is obviously more intentional than the kind required for sunbathing". Sartre's 'nausea' is a low intentionality activity, Maslow's 'peak experiences' are a high intentional activity. There's is absolutely nothing wrong with either Heidegger or Sartre's philosophy, Wilson stresses, *apart from the fact that it doesn't go far enough*: the new existentialism aims to analyse the intentionality in peak (or 'flow') experiences as much as in nausea. It is odd, Wilson remarks, that Husserl's

phenomenology anticipated the existential philosophy of both Heidegger and Sartre, as it denies the contingency that they emphasise. Perhaps, he wonders, their attempts to sound academically respectable immobilised them and Heidegger, for instance, should have stuck closer to the poetic language of intuition (Wilson states that existentialism has more in common with science fiction than academic philosophy). Sartre, like Derrida after him, thought that Husserl's talk of a transcendental ego seemed like a "survival of romantic idealism, and a threat to the status of phenomenology as an academic discipline". Yet phenomenology is a lived technique, not something that is merely studied within office hours as a historical curiosity, or discussed for 'status'.

In his book on Maslow, Wilson comments that psychology "has taken three centuries to reach the conclusion that man actually possesses a mind and a will". Speaking about Husserl (and Professor Whitehead's) ideas about consciousness, Wilson noted "the strangest thing of all – or so it may appear to some historian of philosophy in a future age – is that this counter-revolution had no immediate effect on philosophy, which continued exactly as before". Heidegger and Sartre "lost all possibility of breaking from the closed circle of romantic defeatism when they abandoned Husserl's fundamental principle: the study of phenomena to uncover the hidden patterns of intentionality". This romantic defeatism remained unanalysed by postmodern thinkers such as Roland Barthes, who spoke of "using" phenomenology, although "it was a vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology, so readily did it agree to distort or to evade it's principles according to the whim of my analysis". And so Barthes also misunderstood Husserl's central

point, and remained mired in his own romantic fatalism until the end. This, like the above, is quoted from his final book: “it was impossible for me to participate in a world of strength …. I no longer had any reason to attune myself to the progress of the superior Life Force…” Shortly after writing these words, he would die from complications after being hit by a laundry van.

The attitude of ‘romantic defeatism’ is central to Wilson’s new existentialism: he sees Romanticism as a kind of evolutionary leap, culturally speaking. “The defeat of the romantics was like the exhaustion of amphibians that cannot yet walk on the land”. This “strange new element”, a world where mind was not completely dependent on external objects for meaning “baffled them” and a gloom descended (Wilson calls existentialism a “new romanticism” and remarks that his own assault on this problem “needs a new name” to distinguish it from the previous two. He would later sometimes settle for ‘Romanticism Mark Three’). The powerful impact of romanticism is discussed throughout the *Outsider* series and indeed throughout most of Wilson’s oeuvre. The typical language which romantics used to describe inner states of affirmation – ‘ecstasy’, ‘rapture’ etc. – soon became stiff and cumbersome, and lumbered to extinction. Existentialism, “founded by a typical romantic, Kierkegaard”, had a much greater linguistic precision, but again succumbed to romantic fatalism, the kind we have seen in Barthes. This is well documented in Wilson’s *Outsider* volumes. It would seem that the will-driven phenomenology of the new existentialism remains strictly for ‘outsiders’ only.

Commonly, Wilson’s use of the term ‘outsider’ is thought of as merely a misfit or eccentric who doesn’t quite fit into society. After 1956 this seems too obvious to think about in popular

cultural terms (despite the return to mass conformity and identikit thought this century), but that was not quite what *The Outsider* was about. “As a social type” Wilson writes in *Beyond the Outsider*, “the ‘outsider’ may be vague; as a description of a state of consciousness definable by phenomenology, it is precise”. So it is ‘outsider consciousness’ that binds together his huge gallery of case studies, not, as commonly understood, a need to merely catalogue unusual or aberrant behaviour. In his debut Wilson was keen to point out that the “Outsider problem is essentially a living problem; to write about it in terms of literature is to falsify it”. This is what he meant by the phenomenological method being an active method, with his statement that ‘why?’ demands too much theorising, whereas ‘how?’ is easily observable “by anyone who goes to enough trouble.” So when Wilson says that “beyond a certain point, the Outsider’s problems will not submit to mere thought; *they must be lived*” and that the term ‘outsider’ refers to a precise state of consciousness which is definable by phenomenology, he is describing an attempt to gain control over the robot, to break the circuitry of habits. The “nineteenth century bad habit” of romantic fatalism should be one of the first to be broken.

The outsider problem is simply the paradox of the indifference threshold, a kind of amnesia or unawareness of those layers of willed intentions under the habitual or robotic surface which we erroneously take to be passive and reflective. (Wilson compares this habit of dependence upon outward circumstances for meaning to a vestigial tail or an appendix). Phenomenology aims to “change man’s conception of himself and of the interior forces he has at his command”. Wilson’s ‘outsiders’ are a foreshadowing of a “future being” (that is, a future state of being)

capable of uncovering the laws of evolutionary intentionality and bringing them to conscious awareness, where they can be 'lived by'. Wilson speaks in terms of a "future being" because "Western man has become so accustomed to the idea of his passivity and insignificance that it is difficult to imagine what sort of creature he would be if phenomenology could uncover his intentional evolutionary structure and make it part of his consciousness". (In *The Age of Defeat* Wilson dubbed this custom "the fallacy of insignificance"). Nietzsche scoffed at Schopenhauer's career pessimism – as did Wilson in *The Strength to Dream* – and celebrated the "ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world-affirming individual". Wilson's 'being' or 'creature' is like the *Übermensch* heralded by Nietzsche's Zarathustra in that it desires freedom *for* rather than merely freedom *from* something: it is an active and not a passive freedom. Because most of our impulses are negative – fear of discomfort and death – we think of everything in terms of 'freedom from' and the sense of ultimate purpose (freedom for) is rarely addressed. This is why consciousness without crisis becomes negative, and why, like Sartre's proprietor in *Nausea* we depend too much on externalities for meaning. The opposite of this, according to Wilson in his collection of essays *Eagle and Earwig* (1965), would be "the ultimately 'free' man who lives an inner reality, independent of the present, sustained from within".

In the fifth volume of the *Outsider* series, *Origins of the Sexual Impulse*, Wilson points out how awareness of the phenomenological method reverses our usual picture of the world where things just 'happen' to us and we consequently think of ourselves as victims of reality. "So we think of reality as a bully, constantly imposing itself on us". But contrary to this

'natural attitude', phenomenology can enable us to see that it is in fact our minds which are the bullies. "Impressions and sensations present themselves to us timidly; our unconscious minds promptly form them into ranks, and batter them into some kind of order, so that they are presentable for inspection by the conscious mind." Innocently assuming that these recruits were always perfectly disciplined, the conscious mind is completely unaware of the drill; Husserl developed phenomenology as a method to catch out the unconscious mind in the act of 'bullying', of imposing form. The victim attitude, when things 'just happen' isn't natural at all, it is a lie, a false notion of passivity. Consciousness is active, intentional, but to realise this requires a significant change of attitude, far away from the romantic pessimism which existentialism and it's philosophical descendants have found themselves entangled in.

Husserl's essential aim was to strip away these false layers and discover the workings of what he called (after Kant) the 'transcendental ego'. Science has the ability to free us from our false self (or selves), and of the naive worldview built on childhood prejudices, but as Husserl has pointed out, our prejudices go a lot deeper than our intellect or emotions. Phenomenology, a 'science of consciousness' wishes to go further and make us aware not only of our own responsibilities for what we take as 'objective' but more importantly, to excavate deeper into primal perceptions and to perceive via a 'pure' unprejudiced consciousness "presiding over perception and all other acts of living" – Husserl's transcendental ego. This, says Wilson, seems to be supported by our common sense and our intuitions (his definition of philosophy was intuition aided by intellect). Philosophers and scientists have been sceptical of

such notions, but Wilson found it supported by poetry and mysticism (Blake's concept of the 'poetic genius', for one). But the point about Husserl's method is that it a method, an act applicable to real life, not a mere theory. It is a how? not a why? And anyone prepared to "go to enough trouble" can know and understand it.

In his final, unfinished masterpiece *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970), Husserl described someone performing the *epochē* as a subject "philosophising in a new way". This new attitude is a transformation from the old passive state and into which "the gaze of the philosopher in truth first becomes fully free". The "transcendental" *epochē*, Husserl says, is an "attitude which we resolve to take up once and for all". Performed with total discipline, this *epochē* forms a "possibility of radically changing all human existence" with it's ability to reach into the "philosophical depths". Wilson stated that the study of intentionality in action would lead to the 'unveiling of the hidden achievements of the transcendental ego' (quoting Herbert Spiegelberg) and this is the impetus behind what he dubbed the "phenomenological quest". Wilson himself was very serious about this and kept a phenomenological diary; his corpus of work – fiction and non-fiction, literary criticism, criminology, psychology and esoterica – are all dependent in the method of phenomenology and true to his Outsider credo, he lived it out far away from the fads of the literary establishment.

A twenty-first century alternative

When asked to describe his influence on philosophy, Wilson once simply remarked "none at all". This is almost true. His

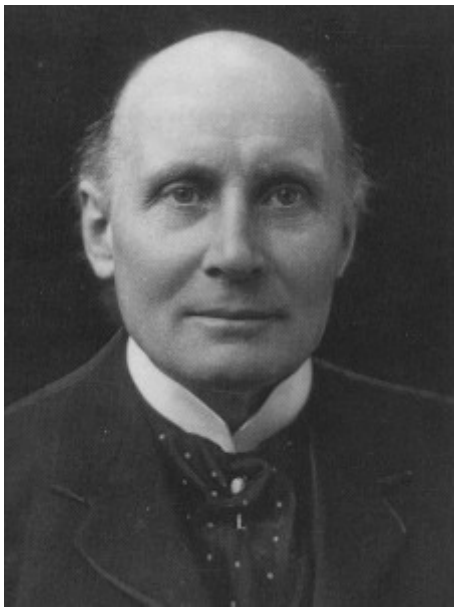
influence on academic philosophy is minimal, but this is unsurprising as he was self-educated and worked outside of the university system. Therefore “interest in him remains confined to a coterie of unaffiliated individualists” according to one Professor, who goes to note that “Wilson’s synthesis of Whitehead and Husserl provides a key for understanding why his vigorous “New Existentialism” has never gained traction in the literature and philosophy departments”. The energetic and independent ideas about the self as outlined in his “new conceptology” of 1956 and onwards are diametrically opposed to the war of attrition on the human subject, which is exemplified by Derrida, Foucault and the pseudo-Nietzschian scepticism of postmodernism. Wilson thought that many of France’s post war thinkers qualified as gurus rather than philosophers, including them alongside charlatan messiahs such as David Koresh or Shoko Asahara, the architect of the Tokyo sarin attack. The current state of post-postmodern academia would appear to make this juxtaposition less fanciful than it originally sounded.

It is diffidence, not *différance* which Wilson saw as the problem of modern philosophy. “The disease of our time is the diffidence, the sense of personal insignificance, that feels the need to disguise itself in academic objectivity when it attempts to philosophise.” The language of philosophy and culture remains contaminated with unexamined “preconceptions and fallacies” about our insignificance, fallacies which seem doubly absurd to anyone who has troubled themselves with the phenomenological method. Schopenhauer’s pessimism should be “regarded with a certain cynicism” according to Wilson as he enjoyed a comfortable life (Nietzsche comically chided his former influence by mocking his playing of the flute after dinner).

It is these deeply engrained, self indulgent and hypocritical preconceptions which need to be questioned. Wilson would rake through an enormous amount of texts to root out “the fallacy of insignificance”, naming this method ‘existential literary criticism’. Outlining it in an essay from 1958, he hoped that this critique would become commonplace in the next ten to twenty years, but like the new existentialism it was part of, it was submerged by ‘deconstruction’ (modelled on Heidegger’s *Destruktion*, itself based on Husserl’s *Abbau*, ‘dismantling’ or ‘unbuilding’). Deconstruction’s obsession with the binary nature of language as a ‘privileged’ construct which erases one thing over it’s opposite, has achieved spectacular success in the increasingly superficial and bureaucratic world of academia – it is after all, “a shallow and smart type of scepticism” as Wilson pointed out during it’s fashionable heyday. In *The New Existentialism* he comments on the meaning of Husserl’s revolution – in the chapter of that title – and notes how destruction “remains associated with freedom”, an indulgence which most of us never outgrow (his studies of criminal behaviour are perfect examples of this self-defeating fallacy in action). The genesis of this association occurs in childhood, Wilson observes, when we are constantly experiencing differing points of view or situations other than the ones we are ‘given’. Although liberating, this awareness of difference is not enough to truly free us from our *diffident* attitudes (‘romantic fatalism’) as it does not touch even our negative values (freedom *from*, etc.) let alone analyse the depths of our perceptual prejudices. By demonstrating just *how* deeply occluded our emotional and perceptual prejudices are, Husserl’s phenomenological method can dismantle the ‘passive fallacy’ of non-intentional consciousness and lead towards a presuppositionless attitude, away from the poor spirited legacy

of romantic failure which Wilson detects in so much literature and philosophy (and indeed, in criminal cases).

Phenomenology must use the descriptive method, the precise description of subjective states. When Barthes agreed to “distort or to evade it’s principles” he was generously illustrating what Wilson saw as his “philosophical ineptitude” – the notion of a “vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology” is oxymoronic. Like Sartre before him, Derrida believes that our sense of meaning derives from outside, so by exaggerating problems about the ambiguity of language he has deterministically found another place to easily lay the blame. Nietzsche – “another brilliant critic (or ‘deconstructor’ of ideals)” says Wilson – wrote that the will to war is greater than the will to peace. “But if Bismarck had tried to use that as a justification of his militarism, Nietzsche would have winced. He didn’t *quite* mean it that way”. Underneath his trademark complexity, Derrida was merely “staring a commonplace”. Alfred North Whitehead got closer to the truth, Wilson thinks, when he stressed that all experience is relevant to philosophy. Whitehead made a list – often quoted by Wilson – in his book *Adventures of Ideas* (1933). Every element of our experience must be interpreted – “experience drunk, experience sober, experience sleeping and experience waking….” and so on. Like the lived philosophy of existentialism “nothing can be omitted”.



A. N. Whitehead

Whitehead also suggested that we have not one but two modes of perceiving the outside world: presentational immediacy and causal efficiency. (Wilson uses the terms ‘immediacy perception’ for the former and ‘meaning perception’ for the latter and I will use these here). Immediacy perception is definite and clear cut, the perception of immediate details or various objects. This is typical ‘everyday’ perception, like sitting in a waiting room and being aware of various sounds and sensations such as the traffic outside or the fish in the aquarium. But if you pick up a magazine and find an article fascinating, these various stimuli cease to matter and you become engrossed in the meaning perception of the narrative. Attention is still focussing on many different ‘details’ – the individual words – but the underlying meaning holds all these together, unlike in immediacy perception where details are ‘noticed’ but the mind remains a blank. However, if you are then confronted with a very difficult article, especially if you are tired, meaning perception could fade, the sentences dissolve into bits and pieces and immediacy returns again. These two modes need not be taken literally, only as a model for how perception works. Apart from that,

Whitehead insisted that there is a third mode – 'symbolic perception' – which is when the two modes overlap one another perfectly. Wilson compares this to the 'Dam Busters', who would drop bombs from planes only when their two fitted searchlights would converge on the water below.

In his 1998 collection, *Below the Iceberg: Anti-Sartre and Other Essays* (from which most of Wilson's above opinions on post-war French philosophy are drawn), Wilson connects immediacy perception and meaning perception with Husserl's 'reproduction' and 'retention'. Husserl argues in his book on time consciousness **[1]** that it assumes these two forms, the first, Wilson says, would be like remembering someone speaking to you yesterday: it has to be reconstructed from memory, like the various pieces that make up immediacy perception. Retention on the other hand, is like someone speaking to you now – there is no need to reconstruct the first part of the spoken sentence to understand the second; like meaning perception, it is grasped as whole. But Derrida insists there is only one type of perception – reproduction, immediacy, the individual words in the magazine article, the bits and pieces. Husserl describes two types of meaning in his *Logical Investigations:* expression (saying something with feeling, like 'help!' when you're drowning) and indication (a sign, like the brand name on a product). For Derrida, expression depends on indication, but because signs point to something else and are therefore dependent upon each other, no signs or indicators have innate meaning – he sees these language signs like waves on the surface of a stormy sea or (in Wilson's image) a large tree whose leaves are tiny mirrors, positioned at different angles and blowing about in the wind. And so, influenced by the 'cynical phenomenology' of Barthes and

his notion of ambiguity, Derrida declares meaning and philosophy to be impossible. However, his proclamation is only based on Whitehead's first mode of immediacy perception; and in the *Investigations,* it must be noted*,* Husserl discusses signs in terms of parts and wholes (mereology) *not* as separate pieces. For this, Wilson states that Derrida's philosophy is simply yet another form of romantic defeatism. Husserl scholars have questioned Derrida's interpretations, with one stating that "Derrida's reading is based on a selection of Husserl's texts, those designed as 'introductions' to phenomenology, and he does not handle the rich and powerful studies Husserl devoted in the 1920's to the problem of method in general and to genetic phenomenology in particular." Wilson compares immediacy perception to a dark room where we feel our way around, and meaning perception to turning on the light, but for Barthes or Derrida, there was no light switch.

Wilson's 'Dam Busters' image for Whitehead's third mode, where the two beams perfectly converge, would form the basis for a concept he would develop out of his foundation work of 1956 – '66. In *Introduction to the New Existentialism*, Wilson advises readers to turn to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (which he regards as a fictional counterpart to Heidegger's *Being and Time*) and to study a particular passage in the second volume about a stop at a railway station. "As a rule it is with our being reduced to a minimum that we live" Proust writes, pointing out that "most of our faculties lie dormant because they can rely on Habit". Yet in this scene his usual sedentary routines have been disturbed so his faculties rise from their torpor and he experiences a 'peak' – "and all my faculties came hurrying to take their place, vying with one another in their zeal, rising, each

of them, like waves, to the same unaccustomed level, from the basest to the most exalted, from breath, appetite, the circulation of my blood to receptivity and imagination."

Our faculties lie dormant due to habit. This is Wilson's collection of habits (originally willed intentions) which he labels 'the robot'. Faculties, including those of receptivity and imagination – poetic faculties – remain obscured underneath the threshold of indifference (in the celebrated 'madeleine' scene early in the first volume of the series of novels, Proust states that "the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me".)

Proust would play an important part in the genesis of Wilson's new concept. The famous incident in *Swann's Way* would be a perfect illustration of it, when a faculty is no longer dormant. As observed by Wilson in *Beyond the Outsider*, Heidegger would write a word such as 'Existence' (or 'Being') with a cross (X) through it. Later fetishised by deconstructionists as *sous rature* or under erasure, this is understood to illustrate a paradoxical or ambiguous concept. Dealing with the strange irony of human freedom, and with it's textual expression in language, literature and philosophy, Wilson developed what he variously called the 'phenomenological faculty', a latent sense or a "desire distinct from sense" which was fully in operation, for instance, when Proust no longer felt mediocre, accidental or mortal. Unable to find the exact terminology, he labelled it 'Faculty X', leaving it slightly open until we know more about it. This faculty, which Wilson sees as particularly developed in the finest poets, "is the freedom experience" – yet we hardly make use of it and it slumbers under our everyday conscious awareness, like one of Lovecraft's creatures from his *Mythos*.

"What is originality?" asked Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882). "To see something that still has no name; that still cannot be named even though it is lying right before everyone's eyes". Formulating his theory of Faculty X in 1966 – although he was speaking of the same sense "of the purpose of life, quite direct and un-inferred" a decade before – Wilson was concentrating his collected new existentialist techniques into this partially named concept. The new existentialism "must begin with the rather pedestrian task of pushing it's scaffolding of language into these new realms". (For a better understanding of this, I suggest turning to the 'New Directions' chapter in *Beyond the Outsider* and the 'Language and Values' chapter of *Introduction to the New Existentialism*). In his own annotated copy of the latter book, Wilson left a typed epilogue between the final two pages. "So the secret of life" he writes, "is that there are great unknown layers of will below the conscious mind". We develop these intentions in the same way we 'take' an interest in something, from a different kind of food to aesthetics or philosophical arguments, as our interest and interaction develop. "But" he says, "the original act is intentional, without any help from the object". Phenomenology, Wilson continues, "is basically a doctrine of the will, just like the philosophy of Nietzsche or Shaw". Using this method, we uncover unconscious layers of will and intention of which we were previously unaware – or "at least you weren't aware of them being 'yours', self-motivated". With awareness they are ours to use.

[1] Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893 – 1917)*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990. The term 'retention' is sometimes substituted for primary (or fresh) memory in the text.

'Reproduction' is also known as memory or re-presentation or is often referred to as 'protention'. Poor editorial decisions caused problems with the original 1928 edition, with portions of earlier texts assembled with later ones, obscuring Husserl's thought. See the translator's introduction, p. XVI. Derrida could only refer to the bowdlerised original edition and the truncated first (1964) English translation of Husserl's book in his *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Northwesern University Press, 1973).

Further reading:

The 'Outsider cycle':
The Outsider. (Gollancz, 1956, many different editions thereafter. The 2001 Phoenix paperback contains the introductory essay *The Outsider, Twenty Years On* from 1976, a postscript from 1967 and a series of postscripts on each of the nine chapters from 2001. It's also the only edition I own which has an index).
Religion and the Rebel. (Gollancz, 1957) Reissued by Aristeia Press, 2017
The Age of Defeat. (Gollancz, 1959) Now reissued by Aristeia Press
The Strength to Dream. (Gollancz, 1962; expanded: Abacus/Sphere, 1976)
Origins of the Sexual Impulse. (Arthur Barker, 1963, Panther, 1966)
Beyond The Outsider. (Arthur Barker, 1965, Pan, 1966, reissued by Carroll & Graf with a new preface, 1991)
Introduction to the New Existentialism. (Hutchinson, 1966). Now reissued by Aristeia Press

And:

New Pathways in Psychology: Maslow and the Post-Freudian Revolution. (Gollancz, 1972)

*The Bicameral Critic: Selected Essays (*Ashgrove Press, 1985)

An Essay on the 'New' Existentialism (Paupers' Press, 1986) Available from the home of 'Colin Wilson Studies' here.

The Misfits: A Study of Sexual Outsiders (Grafton, 1988)

Existentially Speaking: Essays on the Philosophy of Literature (Borgo Press, 1989)

Anti-Sartre. (Borgo Press, 1981, reprinted and expanded as *Below the Iceberg: Anti-Sartre and Other Essays*, Borgo, 1998)

Note. The latter two titles are out of print and very scarce, but several of the most relevant essays have been published in *Collected Essays on Philosophers* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) alongside some even rarer material. An excellent review is here.

Paupers' Press continue to run the series of monographs concentrating on *Colin Wilson Studies*. Important instalments concerning his philosophy (all still available here) have included –

5 – *The Guerrilla Philosopher* by Tim Dagleish

8 – *Colin Wilson as Philosopher/Faculty X, Consciousness and the Transcendence of Time* by John Shand and Gary Lachman

9 – *The Philosophy of Colin Wilson: Three Perspectives* by Howard F. Dossor

11 – *Wilson as Mystic* by Vaughan Robertson (aka Rapahatna). A section of Mr. Rapahatna's PhD thesis, written in the early nineties.

15 *Colin Wilson's Outsider Cycle: a guide for students* by Colin Stanley (with an afterword by Wilson).

The compendium *The Essential Colin Wilson*. (Harrap, 1985) featured several important selections from the *Outsider* texts. Now reprinted and updated.