Existentialism and Ecstasy: Colin Wilson on the Phenomenology of Peak Experiences

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the philosophical foundations of Colin Wilson's New Existentialism. I will show how Wilson's writings promoted a phenomenological strategy for understanding states of ecstatic affirmation within so-called 'peak experiences'. Wilson subsequently attempted to use the life affirming insights bestowed by peak states to establish an ontological ground for values to serve as a foundation for his New Existentialism. Because of its psychological focus however, I argue that Wilson's New Existentialism contains an ambivalent framework for establishing ontological categories, which leads his thought into theoretical difficulties. More precisely, Wilson's strategy runs into problems in coherently integrating its explicitly psychological interpretation of Husserl's theory of intentionality within a broader, and philosophically coherent, phenomenological framework. Wilson's psychological reading of Husserl's transcendental reduction, for example, manifests tensions in how it reconciles the empirical basis of acts of transcendence with an essentialist conception of the self as a transcendental ego. The above tensions, I argue, ultimately render the New Existentialism susceptible to criticism from a Husserlian-transcendental perspective. After outlining a Husserlian critique of Wilson's position, I end the paper by suggesting how some of the central insights of the New Existentialism might help to bridge the gap that persists between pure phenomenological description and metaphysics.

Keywords: Colin Wilson, Depth Psychology, Existentialism, Edmund Husserl, Abraham H. Maslow, Peak Experience, Transcendental Phenomenology, Metaphysics, Mysticism.

Introduction

For over half a century the writings of Colin Wilson (1931-2013) explored existentialist themes and engaged with important problems arising from the connection between truth,

meaning and existence.¹ Openly accepting the challenge of articulating a coherent existential philosophy, Wilson's theoretical orientation led sympathetic critics to label him a "homegrown English existentialist" (Rée 1993, 3). Although Wilson can indeed be regarded as one of the more lively contributors to the already colorful field of twentieth-century existentialism, his writings are also notable for having failed to receive the kind of serious attention and critical assessment bestowed upon other twentieth century existentialists.² This neglect of Wilson's writings is unfortunate since his contributions to existentialism and philosophy are of considerable intrinsic merit.

In what follows I will explore Wilson's thought by outlining its central themes and then assessing some of the important ideas his work takes up. Thereafter, Wilson's New Existentialism is scrutinized but accepted as a unique contribution to twentieth century existential engagement with phenomenological thought. My assessment of Wilson's philosophical insights will proceed in three steps. First, I will give an interpretation of the proper context necessary for understanding Wilson's ideas. Here, a very brief overview of the origins and substantive content of the New Existentialism is provided, with special focus placed on describing the problem of life-failure. Secondly, I show how

¹ Beside philosophy, Wilson's work tended to take up basically existential problems facing the human search for meaning in modern life. These themes, and others, were explored by Wilson in works of fiction, literary and music criticism, criminology, sociology, history, parapsychology (studies of the occult) as well as existential psychology.

² In the words of Matthew Coniam, Wilson is "the forgotten existentialist" (Coniam 2001). Signs that Wilson's work is beginning to attract greater attention in philosophical circles is evident by the recent release of Wilson's collected essays on philosophers (cf. Wilson 2016). Mention of Wilson can also be found in the academic anthology of essays on existentialism edited by Steven Crowell (cf. Crowell 2012). This latter volume, moreover, bears testimony to both the ongoing academic interest in existentialism and the persisting neglect of Wilson's contributions to this field. For example, Wilson is mentioned briefly only to have his writings summarily dismissed (Crowell 2012, p 65-66). With the exception of Solomon, who includes a contribution by Wilson in his 2004 anthology (Solomon 2004), most scholarly assessments of existentialism still fail to even mention Colin Wilson.

Wilson's thought appropriates and expands on ideas from previous thinkers both inside and outside of existential philosophy. In these sections emphasis is placed on Wilson's attempts to synthesize the psychological insights of Abraham Maslow with the methods of Edmund Husserl. Thirdly, and finally, a critical and analytic assessment of Wilson's psychological reading of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as the basis for a critique of earlier existentialism is provided. In these final sections I will both highlight various problems facing the integration of Husserl's doctrines onto an existential psychological framework and seek to address the question of why Wilson's reinterpretation of the Husserlian reduction proceeds as it does. I argue that the connections the New Existentialism makes between transcendental phenomenology and an existential-psychological understanding of transcendence present problems in establishing a suitable foundation for a phenomenology of value.

Subsequently, although Wilson's thought can be seen to expand on some of Husserl's central insights, his revision of Husserl can also be shown to share in a central shortcoming of modern existentialist thought: namely, the failure to properly account for essential structures in relation to the analysis of existential themes. For these reasons, I argue, any application of Wilson's ideas by contemporary phenomenologists needs to take into account how a more systematic philosophical analysis of the epistemological and ontological categories utilized by the New Existentialism can be achieved. I conclude my paper by suggesting why the above is still a worthwhile undertaking.

1. Colin Wilson and the legacy of the New Existentialism

Throughout his life Colin Wilson sought to re-assess the limits of ‘normal’ experience. At the center of his philosophical framework stand his many studies of different states of consciousness explored against the backdrop of a broader philosophical and sociological agenda. More precisely, Wilson’s philosophical approach attempts to join the phenomenological method to an existential outlook interpreting both through the lens of humanistic psychology. In focusing on experience and existentialist themes, while consistently stressing the importance of what the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) called the ‘theoretical attitude’, Wilson’s work set out to undertake phenomenological analyses of intentional mental states.³ The ensuing studies of consciousness, subsequently, are wedded to a broadly metaphysical project. In this way then, Wilson critically reassesses the legacy of twentieth century existentialism and in the process develops his own theories for understanding human motivation and purpose.

A philosophical assessment of Wilson’s work, however, must begin by critically evaluating the combination of influences his writings take up and providing an examination of the ensuing tensions present in his New Existentialism. Before exploring the philosophical aspects of the New Existentialism in greater detail, and showing how it might potentially contribute to the phenomenological program in contemporary

³ Intentionality in contemporary philosophy is a technical term for describing the character of ‘aboutness’ or directedness displayed by consciousness. Understood in this way, intentionality is not concerned with practical goals or behaviors. Terminologically the concept of mental intentionality is a development of the Aristotelian-Scholastic notion of the ‘*intentio*’ signifying object-directed acts of thinking. Husserl expanded on the term that was already used by his teacher Franz Brentano (1839-1917) who introduced the concept of ‘intentional inexistence’ into modern philosophy. Wilson also cites Brentano as introducing the modern concept of intentionality but often fails to note that Husserl critically reinterprets and changes the sense of the term from how Brentano used it (cf. Wilson 1991, pp. 77-8).

philosophy and psychology, it will prove useful to first give an overview of the interests that motivated Wilson's thought.

2. Wilson on the Problem of Life-Failure as 'the' Existential Problem

The central contribution to existential phenomenology that Wilson makes in his writings is undoubtedly his prolonged analysis of the problem of 'life-failure'. Life-failure, put simply, is closely related to a tendency people have of taking things for granted. As Wilson puts it, in day to day life, and especially in the pursuit of utilitarian goals, we tend to narrow our awareness and ultimately diminish the contents of our consciousness. The problem of life-failure arises when we stop acting while nonetheless retaining the adopted narrowness and deflated mental range of what can be called a 'practical attitude'. In this way, we inevitably learn to take the deflated moods for granted and may start to accept them at face value as indicative of a deeper and more basic truth about the human condition. In doing this we are led to erroneously accept the inevitable moments of low vitality (characterized by boredom, outer directedness and loss of purpose) as representing the 'truth' about the human condition. We then, simultaneously, take the world at face value and accept the loss of connection to deeper sources of value and meaning as normal. This, in turn, leads us to deny the objectivity of meaning and purpose as revealed through the intentionality of consciousness. Eventually, nothing seems worth doing and we become, in Wilson's words, "like grandfather clocks, powered by watch springs" (cf. Wilson 1964, 26 & Wilson 1980, 89).

The above phenomenon of life-failure, Wilson believed, stems ultimately from a mistaken belief about the nature of consciousness. A belief, moreover, that Wilson thought had crept into contemporary philosophy. In philosophy, as in life, "...an attempt to achieve something presupposes a certain formality of self-belief" (Wilson 1959, 154). More precisely, this is the belief that consciousness is essentially active (and intentional) and more than just an empty reflection back to us of reality. Ignoring this insight is the main reason so many people take conscious awareness as only valuable as a passive representational medium allowing us to better manipulate physical reality. This outwardly directed and one-dimensional orientation, while important in many ways, nonetheless causes us to accept an unwarranted assumption. Chiefly, it leads to a devalued assessment of human potential. Wilson not only denies that the passive static assessment of human life is valid, he consistently takes steps to diagnose its origins. The mechanistic or passive worldview is based on the negation of human potential. It accepts life-failure because it rejects the possibility of transcendence and the attainment of a deeper connection to an essentially supra-objective realm of meaning. As such, the problem of life-failure needs to be closely scrutinized, especially by existentialists, since: "...the ideal aim of the existentialist is to finally summarize life, its ultimate affirmations and negations" (Wilson 1959, 165).

Existentialism, in other words, must deal with both the full scope of human freedom but also with the problem of meaning.⁴ Since the direct experience of freedom,

⁴ The question of what existentialism is, and how it relates to 'metaphysics' or 'religion' broadly conceived, has historically been answered in many ways. According to Walter Kaufmann: "Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy" (Kaufmann 1957, 11). For our purposes here, we can state that existentialism and existentialist themes were treated more

meaning, and purpose (along with the dynamic character of the human imagination) are just as real as their opposites - it is only right that they be philosophically clarified. In his essay “Existential Criticism,” Wilson comments, “...no human situation is ever defined by ‘the facts.’ Any attempt to do so is to leave out the most important element — man’s will”. (Wilson 1959, 171). A phenomenological examination of ‘acts of will’ and ‘valuing,’ especially when apprehended in what Husserl called ‘the natural attitude’, can help us highlight certain phenomena that give evidence for the reality of freedom and meaning in the universe. The role of philosophy, Wilson contends, is precisely to highlight these moments of transcendence and then understand how they affirm a sense of purpose. For this reason, the acceptance of meaning as a reality is imperative. Once the structures of the world are grasped, in moments of “heightened meaning perception”, the philosopher effectively expands his or her consciousness and *existentially* apprehends the truth about the human condition. This outlook, of course, goes against much ancient philosophy, as well as a great deal of mainstream twentieth-century thought, including mainstream existentialism.

For example, ancient philosophy was concerned with studying substances and undertaking a logical analysis of ethics and humanity’s relation to material and formal aspects of reality. In modern thought, by contrast, a turn to the subject was initiated by

seriously, and given greater intellectual attention, on the continent of Europe than they were (or are) in the ‘Anglo-sphere’. The Polish philosopher I. M. Bocheński implicitly confirms the above when he writes: “...in point of time [existentialism has] a place in the continuation of life-philosophy [i.e. the thought of Dilthey, (the later) Bergson and Klages, amongst others] and contains both phenomenological and metaphysical elements” (Bocheński 1966, 30). Bocheński’s characterization is very close to Wilson’s own. Wilson held that: “[existentialism]...is...a philosophy that asks the kind of questions that were once regarded as ‘religious’: questions about the meaning of human existence, freedom and the existence of God” (Wilson 1966, 13). In what follows, I will take the above characterization of existential philosophy, as closely related to the German and French continental traditions, as what is meant by terms ‘existential’ and ‘existentialist’ in Wilson’s writings.

Descartes. The Cartesian attempt to turn philosophy into a science started from an exploration of inner states or ideas. A variation on this Cartesian program was later taken up by the phenomenological movement (cf. Wilson 1991, 47-50). In the twentieth century, German phenomenology was developed up by both German and French thinkers and was eventually transformed into existentialism. Nonetheless, according to many proponents of early existentialist thought, existence is to be understood as an effectively irrational and contingent affair.

Moreover, although we are free, the existentialists argued that the truth about the radical contingency of our existence can only be revealed through an analysis of moods and practical activity in day to day life. To this end, the existentialists assumed the primacy of a fundamentally irrational view of existence. The existentialist understanding of the human condition was basically an expansion of the focus on alienation and *ennui* developed by earlier nineteenth century thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In fact several prominent existentialists, most notably Heidegger and Sartre, attempted to make use of Husserl's phenomenological descriptive studies precisely to shift the focus of philosophy directly onto these aspects of lived experience. In this way modern existentialism concluded that closer studies of acts of will and valuing can show us that although humans may indeed be free we often face painful choices. Focusing primarily on our radical freedom, the existentialists denied that any transcendent meaning for human life was possible and that, against this backdrop of an indifferent universe, only acts of commitment could make sense of our freedom.

The existentialists suggested, in other words, that the full understanding of human life could find no transcendent ground and that our freedom completely exceeds any abstract philosophical categories that attempt to make sense of life. The ensuing ‘messiness’ of natural reality can therefore be said to render the rationalist concerns of traditional philosophy, as J. P. Sartre puts it: “a manifestation of bad faith” (Sartre 2003, pp. 70-94).⁵ Thus, according to the most popular mainstream expression of the existentialist position, only when we shift our concerns away from attempts to understand essential truths [about which following Sartre, most existentialists agreed, we could know nothing since “*existence precedes essence*”] and strive to attain nominally ethical goals, such as the attainment of “authenticity”, can we live a good life. What this often meant, in practice, was that ultimate values were seen by existentialists to be reducible to, and just as contingent as, subjective acts of feeling and that any meaning we ascribe to our lives as a whole is just an emotional projection of ultimately personal feelings. The basic

⁵ These conclusions are not surprising. By focusing on the absurdity of being, the existentialists arrived at the position that human life, as one small part of an irrational universe, was an absurd phenomenon. “A man who has become conscious of the absurd”, Albert Camus writes, “is forever bound to it” (cf. Camus 1955, 24). Once we realize that all values are contingent, the existentialists argued, we must proceed to brand both traditional metaphysics, as well as Husserl’s essentialist studies of meaning fulfillment, for what they are: uncritical acceptance of traditional philosophical prejudices. Notwithstanding the fact that Husserl sought to overcome prejudice by bracketing metaphysical assumptions, the atheistic existentialists (beginning with Heidegger) criticized this approach and concluded that any possible meaning available to human beings must arise from sources that are just as contingent and fleeting as the temporally determined human acts of willing and thinking from which it derives. The German and French existentialists, therefore, unite in reading Husserl as a ‘neo-Cartesian’ with his phenomenological method as stressing essentialist categories and therefore a relic of what Derrida later called the “metaphysics of presence” (cf. Derrida 1973). The story is somewhat different with agnostic and theistic existentialists (such as Kierkegaard and Pascal- who Wilson views as existentialists, cf. Wilson 1957). Herein we will tentatively accept the existentialist categories for assessing the problem of life-failure as requiring a non-theological starting point; even if religious and mystical experience can, as Wilson thinks, be called on as evidence, i.e. once the basic facts are suitably accounted for.

message of mainstream existentialism, in effect, is that the truth of the human condition is precisely what Wilson describes as ‘life-failure’.

3. Wilson on Overcoming Life-Failure

In re-appropriating Husserl’s insights about the nature of mind, by contrast, Wilson turned back to the beginnings of continental existentialism. Instead of following Heidegger and Sartre, his thought placed special emphasis on what Abraham Maslow called the peak experience. Marshalling phenomenological evidence, especially as manifested in various states of heightened awareness (referred to as “meaning perception” by Wilson), his New Existentialism attempted to establish an intuitive psychological basis for providing a deeper analysis of the apprehension of meaning. The examination of the “mechanisms of consciousness”, subsequently, were held by Wilson to reveal not merely passivity and contingency but, more importantly, clues about how we might grasp deeper meanings through the study of transitory mental states of *prehension*.⁶ In an important sense, therefore, Wilson’s work is a sustained attempt to provide a psychological and sociological analysis of the Husserlian notion of intentionality. However, as will become clear, these attempts to account for how meaning is (or fails to be) apprehended in the context of concrete natural experiences ultimately distances Wilson’s approach from Husserl just as much as from earlier existentialism.

⁶ The term ‘*prehension*’ is borrowed by Wilson from the philosophy of organism developed by Alfred North Whitehead cf. (Wilson 1957, 312), (Wilson 1959, 170), and (Whitehead 1929, pp. 19-20, 168, *et passim*).

Wilson believed that reflection on heightened mental states would help achieve access to normally hidden aspects of awareness. This would allow the full meaning of these ‘moments of insight’ to be more fully divulged, as well as confirm the significance of so-called ‘peak experiences’. Attempting to clarify the concept of the peak-experience, Wilson applies Husserl’s methods of reduction (more specifically: the bracketing of the natural attitude and application of the ‘*epoché*’) and undertakes an ‘intentional analysis’ of perception. The implications of Husserl’s theory of the intentionality of thought and perception, Wilson concludes, implies that the insights gleaned from within the peak experience, in fact, point to deeper levels of activity on the part of consciousness. These moments highlight the connection of our minds to a wider existence and warrant us in undertaking a complete re-evaluation of the existentialist position. Wilson proceeds to argue that we can make use of reflection to “pin down” meaningful experiences and learn from them (Wilson 1989, pp. 76-77). Regarding the latter endeavor, art (such as poetry and fiction but also music) is said to be, in many ways, a better method than logic and philosophy for serving as the entry point to understanding the problem of life-failure. Wilson also held that much of traditional philosophy and logic, as well as the objective sciences, unintentionally falsifies the immediate truth about human reality. In narrowly focusing on isolated objective facts about the external world, for example, the positive sciences distort the equally important presence of meaning. Wilson states:

Observed by the intellect alone, physical reality is meaningless. Intellect has no purpose; it is an instrument of analysis. Purpose is a feeling. Nevertheless, it should be understood that ‘feeling’ in this context does not mean physical sensation, or the emotions it evokes. In *La Nausée*, Sartre’s hero speaks of a café proprietor, and comments: ‘When his café empties, his head empties too.’ Such a man is the opposite of what the ‘existentialist’ sets out to be. He has no inner reality; his mental life is a

series of sensations and ideas aroused by his immediate experience. Here, then, is the *a priori* of existentialism. Its 'value judgement' is concerned with 'inner-reality.' The opposite of the café proprietor, with his life of sensation that is sustained entirely from the outside world, is the ultimately 'free' man who lives an inner-reality, independent of the present, sustained from within (Wilson 1959, 156)

Therefore, and notwithstanding the similarity of the above insight to the existentialist's focus on freedom and willing (especially as articulated by Sartre and Camus), Wilson arrives at a very different philosophical position than earlier German and French existentialism.

The New Existentialism develops precisely as a philosophical framework for more fully exploring the overcoming of life-failure and attempting to clarify the objective truth about the human condition as revealed through our innate capacity for transcendence. In this way the New Existentialism challenges earlier philosophical assumptions about human nature and reality. Wilson maintained: "[e]xistentialism is the attempt to philosophise with no reference to *a priori* intellectual concepts. It is, as it were, the philosophy of intuition" (Wilson 1959, 154). The intuitive apprehension of meaning, an intuitive apprehension of value, is ultimately said by Wilson to be the goal of human life (cf. Wilson 1957, pp. 66-7). Once we grasp the intrinsic value innate to the world in experience, Wilson maintains, the full range of value response eliciting a heightened sense of purpose and meaning perception allows us to begin to appreciate the depths of our connections to the world and expand human potential. Therefore, even if viewed as the only viable philosophical approach for better understanding the relationship of lived experience to reality, in its traditional pessimistic forms existentialism negates its own potential. The existentialists, we could say, shun deeper theoretical explorations of

meaning. For this reason a New Existentialism is necessary in order to make use of both non-intellectual and mystical resources as well as develop a broader, psychologically based, philosophical analysis of meaning perception and better clarify human motivation and purpose.⁷

Making use of Husserl's phenomenological reduction, which is understood by Wilson to affirm perception as both intentional and working below the level of immediate awareness, the New Existentialism seeks to explore the 'perception of meaning'. Since perception is active –the 'prehension' of the structures of reality- its deeper correlates (and their relations) are what philosophers should set out to study. Once clarified, for example by applying Husserl's *epoché*, the phenomenological apprehension of the structures of consciousness can help show how we directly grasp meaning in connection to our experience of the world. In this way we also learn to realize that acts of meaning apprehension happen all the time. They communicate an accompanying sense of purpose that should be viewed as connected to a deeper existential foundation. Therefore, once we begin building from the apprehension of expanded meaning insight, from moments of spiritual and intellectual clarity (i.e. life-affirming 'peak' states) the essentially 'intentional' nature of consciousness points to a fundamental flaw in the contingency thesis of earlier existentialism.

For these reasons, Wilson frequently referred to life-failure as the concept of "upsidedownness" (cf. Wilson 1988, 453). This description, of course, only makes sense if the standard for understanding values as 'up' or 'down' (i.e. higher and lower) is

⁷ As Wilson noted in the early 1960s, "[existentialism]...began as a revolt in philosophy, it has already extended its sphere to psychology. In due course it may well reach all the sciences" (Wilson 1963, 13).

implicitly accepted as valid. That this was the case for Wilson in his work is evidenced from his frequent attempts to argue a non-relative status of values as a precondition for articulating a consistent philosophical outlook. A consistent philosophical outlook, in short, would be one compatible with an intellectual and emotionally satisfactory analysis of the human condition. In other words, the problem of establishing a basis for meaning in life was said by Wilson to be of central importance in developing a fully existential philosophy.

4. Wilson's New Existentialism in Philosophical Context

It was not long before the philosophical exploration of life and meaning became the central core linking various concerns throughout Wilson's eclectic writings. From 1956 to 1966 Wilson produced his so-called 'Outsider cycle'. Beginning with a close exploration of experience and blending a non-naturalist or metaphysical Nietzscheanism with a phenomenological account of value apprehension, Wilson's philosophical position can be summarized as follows: we start by developing a phenomenological psychology as the basis for an alternative existentialism and then apply the insights of our philosophical method to life. Some critics might disagree with this assessment. For example, John Shand notes how,

If Colin Wilson's philosophy might be said to start with Husserl, it should be noted that it culminates in Nietzsche, the only philosopher in Colin Wilson's view who managed to find a way of overcoming total nihilism and thus could affirmatively be 'yea saying' to life (Wilson 2016, xiv).

However, Wilson seems to have both started and ended with Nietzsche not Husserl. It is the former not the latter's ideas featured in Wilson's first book *The Outsider*.⁸ Howard F. Dosser, furthermore, indirectly affirms the above Nietzschean starting point of the New Existentialism when he characterizes Wilson's philosophical thought as directly related to 'Western Romanticism' (See Dosser 1990, pp. 45-6). Vaughan Robertson seems to concur with Dosser's summary, classifying Wilson's basic approach as being that of a "Romantic Mystic" (cf. Robertson 2001).⁹

Nonetheless, and however else we understand the development of his thought, it seems clear that Wilson introduced a philosophical exploration of the problem of life-failure already in his first book *The Outsider* (1956). There Wilson names several philosophers and artists as concerned with what he calls 'the Outsider problem'. The Outsider is designated as "the individual who feels too much; sees too deeply" (Wilson 1956, pp. 13-15, *et passim*). In *The Outsider* however, Wilson also gives a special place to the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is there said to have grasped the negative aspect of the problem of life-failure (the need for transcendence) more fully than any previous thinker.

⁸ Wilson's relationship to Nietzsche, however, is complex. Assessing his significance, in *The Books in My Life*, Wilson says of Nietzsche that his greatness was his ability to focus on strength and that, "[Nietzsche] was the first to see the errors of romanticism, and to see clearly beyond it". For these reasons, Wilson thinks Nietzsche is: "one of the most important philosophers of the past two centuries" (Wilson 1998, 195).

⁹ Robertson's assessment of Wilson's position, I think, contains much truth. Nonetheless it wasn't how Wilson himself primarily characterized his approach. Wilson often referred to his New Existentialism as a more scientific account of the human situation than the developments of earlier existentialists. Mysticism, after all, can occur without reflective or discursive thought, whereas Wilson's analyses of experience are primarily theoretical and analytic - especially insofar as his work stresses that the rational mind (with its logical and conceptual tools) is necessary for grasping the true meaning of the insights that support the truths communicated by so-called 'mystical visions'.

In *The Outsider*, however, Nietzsche's achievement is assessed negatively, since he was unable to fully overcome the problem and his life ended tragically. However, in line with Nietzsche's approach, there was originally no attempt on Wilson's part to articulate any ontological categories for advancing the analysis of the problem of life-failure. In this sense, Wilson's philosophical orientation is very modern. In effect, and throughout his career, Wilson's engagement with and endorsement of modern philosophy was quite explicit. In many of Wilson's writings we find mentions of the thinkers Paul Ricoeur labeled the modernist "masters of suspicion" (i.e. Nietzsche, Marx and Freud) (see Ricoeur 1970, 32). However, although Wilson is usually critical of the last two of Ricoeur's seminal modern trinity (Marx and Freud), his relationship to Nietzsche, as noted above, is more complex. For this reason alone, Wilson's incorporation of Nietzsche's insights into his own philosophy of consciousness can be said to motivate the expansion of his original approach. In the subsequent works that made up the Outsider cycle, Wilson expands on his original existentialist starting point by merging process philosophy, humanistic psychology and intentional analysis into the New Existentialism.¹⁰

According to Wilson, almost all earlier existentialists accepted the 'vastation' experience of contingency and the tragic absurdity of life. In other words, the existentialists accepted the meaninglessness of the world as an ultimate truth about the human condition. Wilson, borrowing the term 'vastation' from Henry James, Sr., also accepts James's meaning of this term as one describing an overpowering fear that can

¹⁰ The collected volumes of the Outsider cycle, after *The Outsider* from 1956 and its sequel, *Religion and the Rebel* from 1957 are, in order of publication: *The Age of Defeat* 1959, *The Strength to Dream* 1962, *Origins of the Sexual Impulse* 1963, *Beyond the Outsider* 1965 and *Introduction to the New Existentialism* 1966.

suddenly came upon someone and reduce their psychological state from smugness or contentment to fearful helplessness (cf. James 1879 cited in Wilson 1956, pp. 111-112). The vastation experience seems to be analogous, if not identical, to what Viktor Frankl called “meaning or existential frustration” (Frankl 1967, pp. 1-19). Comparing the vastation experience of complete contingency with the apprehension of transcendent meaning (when our place in the universe is glimpsed with greater clarity in connection to the whole), Wilson denies that the sense of meaninglessness and despair is more real than that of purpose and meaningfulness. Moreover the implication of this deeper understanding of meaning apprehension in relation to a larger, and far more complex, reality is soon demonstrated to be a valid response to the basically existential problem of life-failure. Wilson explains this by focusing on a phenomenological clarification of Maslow’s *peak experiences*.

Far from being an illusion, or merely subjective, Wilson held that the content of a peak experience points towards the reality of meaning as present in the world and is therefore able to provide a more complete evaluation of the possibilities inherent in human existence. A structural analysis of the peak experience, in other words, would establish that consciousness provides a foothold into deeper levels of reality through which we can begin to understand through the significance of intentionality. In this way, our minds connect to higher levels of reality informing value-responses. Soon after publication of *The Outsider*, Wilson began to make use of the writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, coming to view both as important sources for developing his project.

Simultaneously, while affirming yet developing Nietzsche's perspectivism and relativist epistemology, Wilson began to seek a new ontological reading of intentionality as a further step towards overcoming the pessimism about the human condition maintained by earlier existentialists. A relativist understanding of value, in fact, is said by Wilson to be the implicit assumption maintained by most post-modernists as well as analytic and existentialist philosophers alike. By contrast, following Husserl's lead, Wilson denies that reality, as revealed in lived experience, is essentially either mechanical and atomistic or fundamentally absurd.¹¹

To support the above insight, in his later writings - beginning in 1970, Wilson introduced his theory of Faculty X. Faculty X can be described as a wider mode of consciousness, closely linked by Wilson to the poetic imagination. Summarizing the concept of Faculty X, Wilson writes it is: "...the key to all poetic and mystical experience; when it awakens, life suddenly takes on a new, poignant quality" (Wilson 1970, 58). Faculty X is not imagination *per se*, nor is it an extension of image consciousness simply reflecting the world back to us. Instead, Faculty X can be described as: "[the] ability to 'realize' another time and place.... It is quite clearly a natural ability we all possess, but that we fail to understand" (Wilson 1983, 134). In both his fiction and non-fiction writings, subsequently, Wilson strove to promote the reality of these 'spiritual' powers

¹¹ Intellectually, and assessed from within the context of contemporary English philosophy, Wilson's views might be said to most closely resemble the position defended by the now almost completely forgotten English philosopher C. E. M. Joad (see especially *Matter, Life and Value* from 1929 which is referred to by Wilson as a philosophical repackaging of the worldview of G. B. Shaw, cf. Wilson 2004, 407). Joad's vitalist philosophy and objective account of values comes quite close (albeit minus Wilson's neo-Bergsonian intuitionism) to the evolutionary vision of human potential and the objectivity of value described in the New Existentialism.

connecting us to a larger world and making human freedom possible. The human mind, in tapping hidden energy reserves, can attain a “bird’s eye view” and, in this way, glimpse truth in a way that justifies optimism (see Wilson 2009, 3). Distinguishing this philosophical approach as a novel and positive form of existentialism, yet without advocating traditional religious answers to basically “religious problems,” Wilson proceeded to develop various methods for justifying his metaphysics of value.¹²

5. The Primacy of the Peak Experience: Wilson’s New Existentialism as Existential Psychology

Wilson, as noted, made use of existential phenomenological analysis and applied it to an exploration of psychological states (cf. Wilson 1966, Wilson 1972 & Wilson 1991). The New Existentialism begins by supplementing the analysis of the peak experience with a phenomenological exploration of the nature of consciousness. In taking this approach, Wilson is influenced by the Husserlian phenomenological project. Husserl’s attempts to establish a scientific (non-Hegelian) phenomenology are consistently judged important by Wilson. For example, Husserl’s groundbreaking insight, that consciousness is intentional and underlies all psychological acts of perception and practical decision making, is explicitly endorsed by Wilson throughout the later books of ‘the Outsider’ cycle.¹³ According to Wilson, the insight that consciousness and perception are

¹² The problem of philosophically assessing Wilson’s own positive position, however, is complicated due to the unsystematic quality of his writings and his failure to clearly articulate a metaphysical presentation of the fundamental categories his thought makes use of. Wilson instead often claimed that the most important genre for the full expression of any existential/philosophical outlook was not the academic treatise but literary fiction. This leads him, in his philosophical writings (for better or worse) to frequently sideline scholarly protocol.

¹³ On Husserl’s theory of ‘intentionality’ see (Husserl 2001, pp. 94-5ff), and (Husserl 1997, pp. 216-218). The importance of Husserl’s ideas to Wilson is highlighted, for example, in remarks he made in passing

intentional was neglected by earlier existentialists, and also frequently misunderstood by almost all modern thinkers and scientists: “Phenomenology is a Copernican revolution in thought, whose full implications were hidden even from its founder Husserl” (Wilson 1966, 71).

Tracing the origins of European existentialism as a philosophical movement back to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Wilson refers to existentialism as, “simply a new form of 19th century Romanticism—Romanticism Mark II, so to speak” (Wilson 2006, 1). Nonetheless, Wilson turns to Husserl in order to undertake his reform of earlier existentialism.¹⁴ However, in his attempts to formulate “Romanticism Mark III” (as Wilson calls it), certain theoretical problems can be seen to emerge in both the above assessment of Husserl’s relation to modern philosophy and in the synthesis Wilson undertakes using the psychology of the peak experience analyzed through the phenomenological concept of the reduction. Wilson’s phenomenological approach, as already mentioned, embraces non-Husserlian influences. As such, it is not surprising that Wilson’s work came to more closely resemble a hybrid of the fundamental ontology of Heidegger as read through the “logotherapy” of Viktor Frankl, than any of Husserl’s

about Cassirer (in Wilson 1998). There Wilson writes, “...when I first came upon Cassirer I was inclined to think of him as a kind of inferior version of Edmund Husserl. (I still feel much the same about Kant)” (Wilson 1998, 214). This is high praise indeed for Husserl. In fact, I can think of few modern thinkers who would rank Husserl above Kant regarding his significance as a philosopher.

¹⁴ This is not, altogether, a strange or unprecedented strategy. In many ways Husserl’s writings can be seen to be the beginnings of what later became ‘existentialism’ (for example Husserl’s influence is present on the writings of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre). Existentialism is mostly out of favor today and usually described as either a ‘mere fad’ or an undisciplined excuse for avoiding analysis and logic. Existential philosophy however, was at its height when Wilson wrote his first book. Arguably this period, in the mid-twentieth century, featured existential thinking at its best, namely as an attempt to promote what William Barrett describes as the connection to life and the world beyond static, automatic, routine (cf. Barrett 1958, pp. 3-7).

actual writings. For this resemblance, moreover, a strong temptation arises to refer to Wilson's New Existentialism as a more humanistic form of Heideggerian philosophy.¹⁵ For a variety of reasons, many already alluded to above, this understanding of Wilson's project should be avoided. Keeping in mind Wilson's broader agenda, and turning to the phenomenological evaluation of the problem of life-failure as *the* fundamental mistake of modern thought, traditional existentialist approaches will fail to do justice to Wilson's primary aim of developing a science of experience (and cf. Wilson 1957, 66; & Wilson 1972, 26).

There is, nonetheless, a very close resemblance between Wilson's ideas and those of Victor Frankl. For example, where Frankl writes of how,

in any type of therapy there is a theory underlying its practice—a *theoria*, i.e. a vision, a *Weltanschauung*... logotherapy is based on three fundamental assumptions that form a chain of interconnected links: 1. Freedom of Will; 2. Will to Meaning; 3. Meaning of Life (Frankl 1967, 2).

When Wilson engages in explorations of what can be described as 'the mechanisms' for the attainment of peak experiences he often, like Frankl, assesses the role of the will and the imagination giving them a central role in helping human beings attain a higher sense

¹⁵ The exaltation of life and focus on intentionality as practical and connected to life tasks, very much resembles Heidegger's fundamental ontology and echoes the former's critical transformation of Husserl's Cartesian focus on subjective states into a 'life philosophy'. Heidegger, in *Sein und Zeit* not only transforms Husserlian phenomenology into what he calls the 'Analytic of Dasein' (i.e. an engaged analysis of lived human life) but also stresses how any intellectual abstractions imposed on our 'life projects' are movements away from genuine thought or *Dasein's* authentic self-actualization (cf. Heidegger 1962, pp. 274-5). Although Heidegger manifests an interest in authenticity and life philosophy, from a Wilsonian perspective, what the German thinker calls the 'forgetfulness of being' forsakes intentional analysis of acts of consciousness. Heidegger, of course, regards the latter exercise as too subjective, claiming it misses the direct engagement with Being in a *pre-ontological* way that his philosophy seeks. Unfortunately any further comparison of Wilson and Heidegger is beyond the scope of the present paper.

of purpose (Wilson 1989, 77).¹⁶ Since the presence of meaning is said to be objective or part of reality, the ontology maintained by the New Existentialism is nonetheless strongly phenomenological in the sense that it begins from this focus on immediate experience of value. To extend descriptive accounts of intentional acts, as was noted, Wilson borrowed insights from the work of Abraham Maslow. Maslow observed that values were actualized by people in stages and also that healthy individuals experienced moments of affirmation or “peak experiences”. According to Maslow,

The term peak experiences is a generalization for the best moments of the human being, for the happiest moments of life, for experiences of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, of the greatest joy (Maslow 1972, 105).¹⁷

Wilson nonetheless notes how, for all of his psychological acumen, Maslow simply assumed that peak experiences were something that healthy subjects passively underwent, due to a variety of different factors. In other words, Maslow thought peak experiences were something that happened to healthy people but did not view them as a condition that could be *willed* or controlled in any direct way (Wilson 1972, 195).

In *New Pathways in Psychology*, we are told: “[Maslow]...failed to grasp what Husserl meant by ‘intentionality’: its essentially *free* nature...it seems to me, he had not grasped the full consequences of this insight” (Wilson 1972, 200). This phenomenological structure of meaning perception, however, is viewed by Wilson as not merely as phenomenologically or epistemologically significant but also ontologically

¹⁶ For example, Wilson writes: “This is the problem of our time: to destroy the idea of man as a ‘static observer’, both in philosophy and art. All imaginative creation is involved with the three absolutes: freedom, evolution, religion” (Wilson 1962, 195).

¹⁷ Maslow continues, “I found that such experiences came from profound aesthetic experiences such as creative ecstasies, moments of mature love, perfect sexual experiences, parental love, experiences of natural childbirth, and many others” (Maslow 1972, 105).

important. In his *Introduction to the New Existentialism*, Wilson states: “[w]hatever its field, phenomenology is an attempt to observe things as an emanation of consciousness, and ultimately to increase the control of the human being over his own existence” (Wilson 1966, 63). Focusing on the ‘intentional’ nature of consciousness, and its inescapable role in the attainment of peak experiences, it is maintained that peak experiences can be conditioned and made to happen on a regular basis, especially once we tap into the fact that, as subjects, we unconsciously co-operate in the perception of reality. In this way, the peak experience can be viewed as quasi-mystical glimpse into the connectedness and objective meaningfulness of reality.

Linking the above insight to the problem of how to maintain a connection to meaning and purpose, Wilson asserts, phenomenology can be used to reveal an “evolutionary impulse” present in the human species. Ecstatic states of awareness, moreover, are said to signal the approach of new and higher levels of consciousness (Wilson 2009, 51). The peak experience, in effect, is essentially a sign for the substantial reality behind what the English writer G. K. Chesterton called epiphanies of ‘absurd good news’ and what Marcel Proust describes as the attainment of ‘*moments bienheureux*’. As will be seen however, the above explanation of the psychological mechanism for grasping value gives rise to problems since Wilson relies on an explicitly naturalized version of Husserl’s essentialist and transcendental phenomenological method.

6. Wilson's Phenomenology of the Peak Experience: A Critical Husserlian Response

Here it can be noted how, although Wilson evokes Husserl as a model for studying consciousness, Wilson's approach is far from the Husserlian conception of phenomenology as the study of essential structures. Husserl, for example, set out to develop a "...self-contained, pure phenomenological *a priori* psychology" (Husserl, 1997, 230).¹⁸ Just like his existential and phenomenological predecessors, who critically broke with Husserlian phenomenology in one way or another, Wilson would therefore seem to be rejecting the limits imposed by Husserl on phenomenological intuition. However, unlike earlier existentialists, Wilson self-consciously turns back to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as his philosophical reference point for establishing the New Existentialism.

Unfortunately Wilson's interpretation of key themes in Husserl can be shown to clash with the latter's project of establishing an *eidetic science* of consciousness.¹⁹ In chapter two of *Introduction to the New Existentialism*, entitled "What is

¹⁸ The well catalogued movement from neo-Kantianism to phenomenology (and so-called life-philosophy or existentialism within German philosophy) requires little explication. Interested readers can consult any one of numerous existing historical studies. This same movement and list of influences shaping Wilson's early thought was prominent not so much upon the writings of Husserl, but rather, as mentioned, those of his one-time research assistant Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was mired in fallacies and the preconceptions of the Western tradition going all the way back to Plato. Influenced by Heidegger, the French father of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, similarly attacked Husserl's essentialist starting point by undertaking a deconstruction of the Husserlian (and Kantian) notion of the transcendental ego (cf. Sartre 1957).

¹⁹ For example, in an overview of phenomenology as a transcendental science of consciousness, Husserl states: "We already know that a pure phenomenological psychology as a science of real facts is not possible. For such a science the purely mental facts that are revealed through phenomenological method would require a methodology that goes after their 'real' [external, concrete] meaning, that is to say takes account of their physical signification, and therewith enters into the realm of the psychophysical. This lies outside our theme." (cf. Husserl 1997, 230)

Phenomenology?”, Wilson writes: “consciousness itself must be studied...While philosophy confines itself to the external universe it is only half a science” (Wilson 1966, 39). Husserl’s phenomenology, moreover, is maintained by Wilson to allow the introduction of a self-critical and non-prejudiced attitude that can be employed in establishing a new science of consciousness. This process, in turn, will establish the possibility of: “...existentialism becoming a ‘true philosophy’” (Wilson 1966, 50). Nonetheless the above ‘value experiences’, along with the life-affirmation they prompt, are frequently and ambivalently described by Wilson as dependent on innate psychological factors. According to Wilson, the important point to focus on is the real or particular conscious ‘acts of will’ that, in engaging the subject and creating the expansion of meaning perception, actualize the connections between mundane consciousness and the world. These acts of will, subsequently, can be said to enable life-affirmation and, through sufficient mental discipline, to lead to an attainment of more objective states of consciousness. Once the “web of consciousness” is expanded and stimulated, Wilson believes, it should become possible to induce visionary moments through concentrated efforts, in this way grounding the insights on a permanent basis (Wilson 1988, 459). Ultimately, Wilson theorizes, a form of ‘super-consciousness’ can arise and higher levels of consciousness will immediately signal the attainment of higher purpose and meaning, i.e., a new stage in human evolution.

Viewed from a Husserlian perspective however, Wilson fails to properly apply the reduction. This, in itself, is perhaps not as serious a charge as it may at first seem. Many later phenomenologists declared Husserl’s phenomenological reduction a dead-end (cf. Heidegger 1985, pp. 110-111). The reason why the above is a notable problem

within Wilson's project is that this strategy leads his thought into the positions referred to by Husserl as "transcendental psychologism" and "anthropologism" (Husserl 1997, pp. 485-500). That is, in combining Husserl's methods with insights drawn from existential psychology, Wilson's strategy faces a serious problem insofar as he takes Husserlian intentional analysis and the reduction seriously but fails to philosophically clarify, in any systematic or rigorous way, how a basically existential phenomenology is compatible with the Husserlian transcendental position.²⁰ More precisely, Wilson never defines or clearly articulates a properly 'phenomenological' foundation (in the Husserlian sense) for analyzing consciousness. Therefore, insofar as Husserl regarded all empirical psychology (and here we can include humanistic versions) as dependent on the 'natural attitude,' Wilson's work - strongly reliant on existential psychology - is *prima facie* not complementary with Husserlian phenomenology.²¹ Wilson's strategy, in effect, lends itself to charges of 'naturalism' influencing and distorting its descriptions of conscious states. This is quite evident in the basically empirical method appealed to by Wilson throughout his various writings for assessing states of consciousness. Wilson's empiricism, combined with a psychologically based and direct intuitive understanding of

²⁰ This paradox is, in fact, present in Husserl's writings and, in a way, inherited by Wilson. It is the problem of intentional analysis itself which is both accomplished by a concrete psychological subject and also directly connected to the framework of transcendental phenomenology. Wilson's New Existentialism, in other words, articulates (in Husserlian terms) a 'psychological' way into the phenomenological reduction (& cf. Husserl's 'Amsterdam lectures' from 1930 [in Husserl 1997]), but then [in Husserl] the connection of this psychological way into both the 'first-person' Cartesian and the 'ontological' lifeworld approaches is left unclear. Wilson, effectively, it can be said, blends the different ways together.

²¹ The extent of Wilson's confusion of this point is evident where he offers comments such as: "It will be seen at once that Husserl's aim is basically identical with that of Jaspers" (Wilson 1966, 63). Wilson also advances the questionable claim that Husserl's phenomenology is perfectly compatible with American transactional psychology, as found in the writings of Hadley Cantril (cf. Wilson 1966, pp. 65; 91).

truth and reality, cannot avoid infecting his New Existentialism with an ambiguous philosophical foundation when viewed from a Husserlian perspective. This becomes especially evident as regards how Wilson applies Husserl's transcendental methods to the analysis of experience.

For example, according to Husserl, the intentional correlate of conscious acts frequently transcends any 'real' or psychological state of consciousness. Only when reduced into their pure act-object (noesis-noema) correlation moreover, Husserl thinks, can the structures of intentional acts can be classified and studied in a scientific way. However, this scientific study of consciousness cannot be attained if we remain within the framework of an empirical or natural-causal model of experience. The constitution of perception according to Husserl is not, as Wilson says: an "emanation of consciousness", nor, on the Husserlian view, does mundane consciousness in any sense help "produce" the objects we see (on this cf. Husserl 2001, Husserl 1997). Instead Husserl attempts to bracket the mundane world through his method of reductions precisely to arrive at a transcendental and reflective grasp of the structures of experience (cf. Husserl 1965, 92). According to Husserl this can only happen after we enact, what is described in his manuscripts as, a "splitting of the ego" (*Ichspaltung*) (cf. Husserl 1973, 560). Subsequently, Husserl expended a great amount of effort (as did his later research assistant Eugen Fink) over the exact interpretation of both the proper way into the reduction as well as the implications of phenomenological insight for both science and philosophy. Wilson, it can be noted here, fails to explore the depths of the phenomenological reduction in his writings. He also frequently fails to address problems

such as the ontological status of the transcendental ego. This renders his claim that he has reached Husserl's presupposition-less starting point open to serious doubt.

Moreover, Wilson argues that the creative impulses allowing for the apprehension of meaningful connections can only be concretely, if not always explicitly, attained through the correlates of mundane consciousness. Wilson's 'super-consciousness' is an expanded consciousness no doubt, but nonetheless an expansion of everyday conscious awareness in what Husserl called the natural attitude. However, if the psychological reduction of what can be called *transcendental* categories like 'intentionality', (along with the 'meaning sense' of transcendent objects i.e. the reduced *noema*) cannot, as Husserl claimed, be understood as merely natural psychological processes, then questions regarding the coherence of Wilson's position quickly arise. Is Wilson promoting a philosophical anthropology or a psychological attempt to combine the natural and transcendental attitudes (as Husserl would put it)? If so, then the Husserlian phenomenologist must rank Wilson's approach as 'mystical' if not ultimately irrational in the same sense that Heidegger's earlier phenomenological ontology was said to be, i.e. lacking in scientific rigor and methodologically unsound (cf. Husserl 1997, pp. 398-400). The rich phenomenological analysis of symbolic versus intuitive knowledge articulated by Husserl is also, at best, underused or, at worse, ignored and bypassed completely by Wilson. Nonetheless, viewing Wilson's project against the above broader phenomenological concerns might still provide the key to appreciating the important insights that Wilson's New Existentialism has to offer. Much like Husserl, Wilson views phenomenology, "as *not a philosophy*; [rather] *it is a philosophical method, a tool*"

(Wilson 1966, 92). Here it can be said when combined together, Wilson's psychological analysis for exploring concrete experience and Husserl's anti-psychologistic model of intentional acts, may point to a possible richer synthesis and a more plausible realist phenomenology for grounding a non-objectivist ontology of values.

However, having already broadly explored and accepted his claim that phenomenology clarifies how humans know and adjust to reality by apprehending transcendent meaning, we must here explore how Wilson's transformation of Husserlian phenomenology into an existential psychological philosophy contains both potentially valid contributions and its own unique set of problems.

To elucidate the reasons for taking the New Existentialism seriously as a philosophical position moreover, some misconceptions about the content of Wilson's thought should also first be dispelled. For example, Wilson has been accused of promoting a strong anti-idealism and an anti-platonic ontology since he rejected the escapism of earlier Romanticism (cf. Kegel 1960, 127).²² This reading of Wilson fails to take into account both his intuitionism and the phenomenological ontology of value his thought sought to develop. That is, from early on, Wilson accepted the basic postulate of Plato's idealism (especially as reformulated by Whitehead), but regarded the two-world hypothesis underlying platonic ontology as in need of an existentialist reinterpretation in

²² Kegel writes: "'The romantic Outsider,' complains Wilson, is a 'dreamer of other worlds'...he is essentially a dreamer 'the idle singer of an empty days'. In essence Wilson is objecting to the very faith which the Romantics had, that truth somehow, someday be objectified. There is a vast difference, he points out, between the realist's cry of 'Truth, what do they mean by it?' and the Romantic's 'Where can I find truth?' The former Wilson identifies as the 'Existentialist attitude,' the latter is the 'Platonic Idealist' approach" (cf. Kegel 1960, 127).

order to establish its viability as a ground for the transcendence of values. In 1959 Wilson wrote:

An existentialist would say that Plato was mistaken in assuming that his 'world of ideas' was somehow objective, a ghostly duplicate of the 'real world.' From the existential viewpoint, the physical world is undoubtedly a secondary order of reality; but the primary reality is man's vitality, his freedom (Wilson 1959, 156).

Wilson's strategy, we could say, rests on a paradoxical ontology underlying his phenomenological analysis. According to Wilson the epistemological grounds for 'higher reality' are directly connected to our intuitively apprehended mental states. The New Existentialism, emphasizing psychological states of awareness, attempts precisely to comprehend important aspects of immediate lived experience as directly related to deeper levels of being. It holds that, "there are external values, values that do not depend on our human needs and desires. If there are not, then human life is truly futile" (Wilson 1964, 26). However, Wilson's position introduces a pronounced tension regarding exactly what the 'subjective' conditions of perception, on the one hand, and the precise relation to 'objectivity' and 'external values', on the other, actually are.

At times Wilson formulates his model of meaning perception directly on realist and biological grounds. For example, in his later work he often cites split-brain research, postulating that the ego is connected to the left-side of the brain and intuition and insight to the right. Split-brain patients are subjects who have had the *corpus callosum* (the bundle of nerve fibers connecting the two hemispheres of the brain) cut in a surgical procedure in an attempt to treat seizure disorders. Wilson uses these case studies as examples to clarify his position. After the surgery, Wilson notes, the two cerebral

hemispheres of the patient's brain become radically limited in their ability to communicate or interact which results in a splitting of the brain and a remolding of the previously connected hemispheres into two separate halves. As was quickly noticed, the right and left cerebral hemispheres in split-brain patients correlated to different psychological powers and conscious abilities (cf. Wilson 1982). On the basis of these studies, Wilson tentatively developed a 'Laurel and Hardy' theory of consciousness and later proposed a 'Ladder of Selves' theory of human personhood. According to Wilson, therefore, we possess access to potential higher 'selves' but must work through the challenges presented by life and balance tensions and psychological conflicts with conscious control of our responses in order to actualize our potential.

What is notable here is not the jumping back and forth between genetic and descriptive psychology (something Husserl carefully avoided) but, instead, how Wilson makes use of *a posteriori* and empirical evidence from psychology and biology to reach a phenomenological conclusion. This strategy distances his approach from Husserl's theory of intentionality which, in its mature form, as the basis of Husserl's account of intentionality, begins from an exploration of the transcendental ego as a formal –not an empirical— unity of consciousness and center-point for experience. It is only against the transcendental ego's ideal unity that intentional structures pertaining to consciousness can be described. Although Wilson claims to accept Husserl's essentially Kantian theory of the transcendental ego, he nonetheless introduces biological and empirical theories to clarify the transcendental and *a priori* aspects of experience. Once again, the orthodox Husserlian will here criticize Wilson's strategy as abandoning the reduction and the transcendental focus on possibility conditions and engaging in speculative philosophy.

7. Wilson's New Existentialism as Phenomenological Ontology

Against the above Husserlian critique, however, Wilson could justly point out that there are many kinds of phenomenology. As a movement, and as a theoretical approach, contemporary phenomenology originally grew out of criticisms of late-nineteenth century experimental psychology. The dominant laboratory psychology of that time focused on measuring so-called 'mental contents' and downplayed the exploration of less tangible mental acts that manifested these contents (cf. Boring 1950). This deficiency in early psychology was the main motivation behind the birth of modern phenomenological thought. In this sense, by exploring the connection between acts and contents of consciousness, Wilson's work can be called 'phenomenological' but cannot be said to be strictly Husserlian. A proper response to the above charges and a defense of Wilson therefore, requires both some philosophical analysis of these problems and a critical overview of the ontological position Wilson adopts. Here, we can only briefly sketch out a Wilsonian answer to what can be called the transcendental challenge.

Interpreted from a strictly Husserlian or transcendental phenomenological perspective, Wilson's New Existentialism, just like Heidegger's thought and Sartre and Camus's existentialism before him, falls prey to what Husserl called 'philosophical anthropologism'. In Wilson's case, moreover, the Husserlian accusation would be valid insofar as Wilson relies on existential psychology to establish many of his basic philosophical categories. To counteract these tendencies, and attempt to more coherently establish a philosophical position, Wilson frequently advocates mystical experiences and

moments of pure vision through which subjects can grasp deeper levels of being. This latter strategy, as outlined for example in his essay “Phenomenology as a Mystical Discipline”, can be seen to pose a challenge to Husserl’s conception of philosophy as rigorous science (cf. Wilson 2006). Nonetheless in order for the New Existentialism to theoretically stand on its own merits, and successfully expand on Husserlian phenomenology in a philosophically relevant way, it must first be shown how meaning is constituted. In other words, we need to know how the role of the subject-dependent source of the peak experience, along with the simultaneously articulated ecstatic insight as a basis for transcendence, can hold beyond genetic or empirical and psychological grounds. Especially since it is on such grounds alone that Wilson points to sources for delineating the ontological structure of meaning apprehension. One way to accomplish the above, I think, is to read Wilson as directly expanding on Husserl’s phenomenology but reframing it as an empirically grounded existential phenomenological psychology. That this is a viable interpretation of Wilson can be corroborated by passages in his writings where he makes use of Whitehead’s theory of *prehension* and philosophy of organism to ground phenomenology. This strategy, on Wilson’s part, however still leaves largely unresolved the problem of how to justify the natural empirically determined categories when applied to the formal, non-empirical, unity of the Husserlian transcendental ego. The answer to this deeper problem can perhaps be found in Wilson’s analysis of the intentionality of the peak experience as a spiritual event that shatters the noetic-noematic correlates of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenological reduction. Wilson’s theory of meaning perception, therefore, might be said to point directly to the affirmation of deeper levels of being as constituting phenomenological insights.

The Husserlian phenomenologist, by contrast, might still voice the complaint that insofar as Wilson's work advocates the articulation of a *Weltanschauung* rather than undertaking exercises in eidetic science, it remains unsatisfactory. This latter criticism, however, would arguably be more devastating if Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was itself without ontological or metaphysical problems. Since, as many critics have noted, there are very real problems both with the Husserlian strategy of reduction and with the ontological basis of the *life-world* underlying Husserl's later generative phenomenology, Wilson's appropriation of Husserl might be defended precisely as attempting to provide a more coherent framework for some of Husserl's more important later insights. Amongst these insights we can cite: the creative (hermeneutic) dimensions involved in the apprehension of meaning, and the connectedness of consciousness with the higher levels of being. However, even granting the above and accepting that Wilson's contributions are significant in these areas this still leaves open the possibility that Wilson's position may be correct for the *wrong* reasons.

In short, although he accepts the analysis of experience and the focus on consciousness as essential for understanding the structure of meaning perception, and although his thought embraces a metaphysics of consciousness arrived at through phenomenological studies of intentionality; nowhere in Wilson's extant writings can a formal and critical assessment of the categories of the New Existentialism be found (e.g. Faculty X, the transcendental ego, the ladder of selves, etc.)²³

²³ Perhaps the abundant manuscripts and research material contained in the Wilson archives at the University of Nottingham in the UK contain notes and other manuscript materials relevant to this problem. If so, future thinkers seeking to assess Wilson's actual achievement as a writer and thinker will need to go through these abundant resources and produce a more systematic study of his philosophical output.

Conclusion

Wilson's position manifests various tensions resulting mainly from his attempts to apply Husserlian phenomenology to the analysis of consciousness in tandem with promoting an implicit revision of the broadly transcendental framework used by Husserl. Although a critical interpretation was given of Wilson's use of key concepts from Husserlian phenomenology, I also demonstrated that Wilson's writings provide important insights for contemporary thinkers engaged with phenomenology. More precisely, I showed that Wilson's work offers important clues for addressing persistent philosophical tensions and limits within Husserl's own thought related to psychology and metaphysics. It can only be tentatively suggested here how Wilson's New Existentialism might be used to supplement Husserl's transcendental phenomenological analysis.

If Wilson's New Existentialism is indeed compatible with what can be called Husserlian phenomenological psychology, then his works (no less than Husserl's) require clarification on an ontological level, as well as critical scrutiny with a focus placed on answering the question of how intentional categories relate to broader, ontological, ones. An examination of how Wilson's phenomenological and psychological insights, grasped in acts of meaning-fulfillment, can be logically justified beyond the limits of reduced acts of consciousness will also be necessary. Here it can be noted that, in many ways, Wilson's New Existentialism manifests the reverse of the tensions present in Husserl's phenomenology. Whereas Husserl veers into phenomenological depths seeking to apply his eidetic and transcendental reductions, thus making the connection with the non-bracketed world and metaphysics difficult, Wilson starts with direct experience and the

problem of life-affirmation in the natural attitude. Whereas Husserl seeks to establish an *a priori* science of experience, the New Existentialism is led to examine how moods and other concrete states of consciousness transform the way we perceive the world in daily life. In many ways, the latter problem is just as complex and beguiling as the reduction of consciousness undertaken in Husserl's writings. However, in its reliance on a wealth of insights culled from careful descriptive analyses to support the theoretical claim that consciousness can apprehend both objective structures and abstract essential meanings the basic problem of thematizing the reduction arises more centrally within Husserl's transcendental phenomenology.

For Wilson this problem is for the most part, pushed into the background - since he misinterprets Husserl's methodology and fails to actually perform the transcendental reduction at all. Instead, Wilson makes phenomenological reflection a psychological discipline and connects it to the problem of clarifying how consciousness can be bound up with direct intuitions of what can be called 'modes of being'. To this end, Wilson simultaneously places focus on phenomenology and Nietzschean acts of ecstatic self-transcendence as the basis for a phenomenologically clarified ontology. According to Wilson, once we see that heightened levels of concentration can expand the narrowness of consciousness as we find it in mundane experience, we will be on the way to achieving more evolved levels of consciousness perhaps permanently manifesting peak experiences. For the above strategy to work on a Husserlian framework however, we must either dismiss or radically reinterpret seminal notions such as: the *epoché*, intentional analysis and the transcendental and the phenomenological reductions. For

reasons spelled out above, and mainly relating to Wilson's misreading of Husserl, the New Existentialism cannot be viewed unequivocally as an improvement over the Husserlian transcendental approach. Wilson's New Existentialism (viewed from a Husserlian perspective) remains within the natural philosophical attitude and therefore fails to adequately make use of the reduction or to thematize conscious acts of motivation and meaning-fulfillment on a transcendental level. Nonetheless, if the existential insights Wilson offers can be made compatible with the methods of transcendental phenomenology (and since Wilson's work is grounded on close analysis of lived experience – it must be stipulated they can) the subsequent potential synthesis would be of great benefit to both phenomenology and contemporary philosophy as a whole.

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