

Our Addictions

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Bruce Wilshire. *Wild Hunger: The Primal Roots of Modern Addiction*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. Pp. xv + 283. ISBN 0-8476-8967-0

Many of the healing professions have pursued a larger vision of health by understanding their activities as more than the curing of disease. Therefore it is likely that a breakthrough in understanding the basic nature of addiction would be welcome news and worthy of thought. Like most large-scale changes, however, careful preparation is necessary for a firm grasp. So first we consider some important background material which will display an antiquated yet still commonly found theory of human nature. With that preparation we will be ready to explore an important new book which might offer a significant improvement in the way we conceive the nest of problems surrounding addiction.

In *The Principles of Art*, among the most inspiring interdisciplinary books of our age, spectacular yet underused, Robin George Collingwood — distinguished historian of Roman Britain, scientist, aesthete, idealist, and pragmatist — made a surprising statement:

Magical activity is a kind of dynamo supplying the mechanisms of practical life with the emotional current that drives it. *Hence magic is a necessity for every sort and condition of man, and is actually found in every healthy society.* A society which thinks, as our own thinks, that it has outlived the need of magic, is either mistaken in that opinion, or else it is a dying society, perishing for lack of interest in its own maintenance.¹

It would be easy to rush to judgment here; one might think that since Collingwood was talking about magic, he must therefore have been discussing stage illusions or bubble-headed mumbo-jumbo. I hasten to assure that he was not talking about any such things. We owe him, or any other serious and well-prepared cultural diagnostician, a patient critical reading on this point, for it is a difficult point to make. The emerging edge of new truth is typically fuzzy.²

Collingwood argued³ that the word *magic* has become a meaningless term of abuse. It came to this fate initially through the offices of the Tylor/Frazer school of British anthropology and its sympathizers.⁴ By the late nineteenth century, scholars noticed that practices by common consent called magical were prominent in non-European civilizations. What, they then asked, was the purpose of magical practices? Their answer, given in terms of a positivistic philosophy which prevailed among scientists at that time, a view which lingers prominently still, was that in understanding human nature the function of emotional life can be minimized and the intellect made supreme. From here it was only a short step to the conclusion that European intellect as exemplified in its science really does work in ways that enables one to control nature, whereas magic — in non-European civilizations and in the “lower classes” of European cultures — doesn’t work to control nature, although users of it obviously think (erroneously) that it does. Collingwood considered the English Tylor/Frazer approach to be linked to the French “primitive mentality” approach of Levy-Bruhl who took matters further to propose that “savages” possessed a completely different and inferior mind in comparison to that of educated Europeans. Collingwood regarded this entire English/French movement as a “half-conscious conspiracy to bring into ridicule and contempt civilizations different from our own.” We might add that the entire approach appears to provide a false picture that has continued to be a fertile ground for nourishing gross racial stereotypes and caricatures, if usually falling short — in its contemporary forms — of advocacy.⁵

Collingwood wrapped up his summary in this masterful fashion:

The magician [currently this word might be *shaman*] and the scientist, they [the Tylor/Frazer school and sycophants] concluded, belong to the same genus. Each is a person who attempts to control nature by the practical application of scientific knowledge. The difference is that the scientist actually possesses scientific knowledge, and consequently his attempts to control nature are successful: the magician possesses none, and therefore his attempts fail. For example, irrigating crops really makes them grow; but the savage, not knowing this, dances at them in the false belief that his example will encourage in the crops a spirit of emulation, and induce them to grow as high as he jumps. Thus, they concluded, magic is at bottom simply a special kind of error: it is erroneous natural science. And magical practices are pseudo-scientific practices based on this error.

Collingwood remarked that “This theory of magic as pseudo-science is an extraordinarily confused piece of thinking.” His strong condemnation of this approach shows that it amounts to little more than a crude scientism.⁶ A series of the sanest minds of the twentieth century agree with him on this

point: Charles Peirce,⁷ William James,⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Herbert Fingarette,⁹ Walker Percy,¹⁰ and (thank goodness) some recent anthropologists.¹¹

Wittgenstein, working through Frazer's *Golden Bough* in the early part of the twentieth century, snorted with emphatic scorn at what he saw on its pages:

Frazer's presentation of the magical and religious views of mankind is UNSATISFACTORY: it makes these views appear as *errors*.

Thus, was Augustine in error when he invoked God's name on every page of the Confessions?

However — one can say — if [Augustine] was not in error, then indeed it was the Buddha [who was in error] — or whomever — whose religion expresses entirely different views. But *neither* of them was in error....

It will, however, never be that people do all these things out of pure stupidity.

Religious action [of "primitives"] is of no other sort than any genuinely religious action *today*, perhaps a confession of sins.

How narrow is the spiritual life for Frazer! Thus, How impossible to understand another life in terms of the English life of his time!

...It is nonsense to proceed so that one would say, as characteristic of [human ritual actions], that they are actions which originated from mistaken views about the physics of things. (Frazer does this when he says, magic is essentially false physics, or else false medicine, technology, etc.)

Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for they would not be so far removed from the understanding of a spiritual matter as an Englishman of the 20th century. *His* explanation of primitive customs are more barbarous than the meaning of these customs.¹²

William James, in the conclusion of his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, attacked the Tylor/Frazer approach and its allies under the polite surrogate title of *survival-theory*: that part of their approach that claimed religion and magic to be mere unreflective dispensable survivals of an ancient "savage" time when "stupid" savages practiced erroneous "science." James was an exceptionally polite and charismatic person. Yet he hammered the survivalists in vigorous phrases that virtually leap off his pages.¹³

It is the terror and beauty of phenomena, the "promise" of the dawn and of the rainbow, the "voice" of the thunder, the "gentleness" of the summer rain, the "sublimity" of the stars, and not the physical laws which these things follow, by which the religious mind still continues to be most impressed; and just as of yore, the devout man tells you that in

the solitude of his room or of the fields he still feels the divine presence, that inflowing of help come in reply to his prayers....¹⁴

Pure anachronism! says the survival-theory; — anachronism for which deanthropomorphization of the imagination is the remedy required. The less we mix the private with the cosmic, the more we dwell in universal and impersonal terms, the truer heirs of Science we become.

In spite of the appeal which this impersonality of the scientific attitude makes to a certain magnanimity of temper, I believe it to be shallow, and I can now state my reason in comparatively few words.¹⁵ That reason is that, as long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but *as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term....* That unsharable feeling which each one of us has of the pinch of his individual destiny as he privately feels it rolling out on fortune's wheel may be disparaged for its egotism, may be sneered at as unscientific, but it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality, and any would-be existent that should lack such a feeling, or its analogue, would be a piece of reality only half made up.

Walker Percy, perhaps the most effective recent opponent of scientism,¹⁶ captured the matter in a throwaway short sentence: "Science cannot utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature in so far as it is an individual but only in so far as it is like other individuals." In other words, Science tells us about classes of things, but not about a concrete individual as such.

Weather Specialist: There is a 50% chance of rain today.

Concrete Citizen: Then shall I carry half an umbrella?

Charles Peirce drove the stake even further. He argued — probably successfully (but one has to maintain an attitude of fallibility) — that even the very method of science is based upon an instinct exercised by a concrete individual, and that all of science arises ultimately from this source. The instinct is the human ability, manifested in most specific individuals, of guessing — a process Peirce called Abduction (not kidnapping, but guessing). Peirce's conclusion: Every new idea in science must enter through the door of some individual's guessing instinct.¹⁷

Both early and late, in a long life of both success and misery, Peirce privately advocated the following conclusions, presented here from his personal journal written when he was twenty-four:

...there is a truth of emotions which is essentially the same as the truth of conceptions. The truths of religion are inconceivable. How then is a religious truth to be stated? Only in propositions; but in propositions absolutely inconceivable. But that which is absolutely inconceivable is impossible. In propositions therefore which though absurd present an absurdity which is virtually solved by an emotion which is true.

Anthropomorphology held as inadequate is then the only true creed.¹⁸

The latest warrior to enter this contest is Bruce Wilshire, the distinguished phenomenologist from Rutgers University. The contribution of his recent volume, *Wild Hunger: The Primal Roots of Modern Addiction*, brings to the entire anti-survivalist or anti-scientism tendency of thought sketched above, a deep philosophical grounding; and he shows (what is lacking in the pioneering works mentioned above) exactly *how* neglecting, misunderstanding, and misusing magic¹⁹ has specifically and deeply wounded our culture.

Is addiction solely the result of causal relations operating within the biochemical system of a human body? Surely that is part of the picture. Government officials in countries that are growers of substances that are potentially addictive²⁰ are often asked "Why don't you stop persons in your country who grow these things?" That is a legitimate question which takes a causal approach to the problem — stop the cause at its source and the effect of addiction will go away. And sometimes these officials respond with an interesting counter, a second question, "Why don't the citizens in the U.S. stop buying these substances?"²¹ This second question presupposes understanding the problem through concepts such as free will, interpretation, communication, or individual character and integrity, roughly the approach of the Wilshire school. We need both, but Wilshire helps us to see that unfortunately, we place almost all our bets upon the method assumed by the first question. Or even more strongly: we often think only in terms of the causal powers of "addictive substances," whereas what we should also be looking at more closely is the choice, by a concrete person, to adopt an addictive lifestyle. If there were no addictive lifestyles, there would be no "addictive substances," but only substances with particular and known chemical attributes.

Is the above yet another plea for what has been termed "treatment" as mentioned — for instance — within discussions of the drug war? If *treatment* means a course of medication, or other causally based therapy, then, no, neither Wilshire nor I are talking about treatment, but instead about something that goes deeper, into the realm of human nature, to the moment when a specific human takes up an addictive lifestyle. Perhaps this moment can be explored along the lines of decision theory, but it more profitably be understood as one or more acts of interpretation, and if so, Peirce's Semeiotic would be a strong tool.²²

A person who wants to work within the tradition of Collingwood, Wittgenstein, James, Peirce, Fingarette, Percy, Wilshire and their allies is faced with an overwhelming methodological barrier, because the scientific (and probably wrong) way of conceiving this matter is still the basis for the conceptual tools of most people who think about these issues. A conceptual gulf looms before us. In view of that gap, as soon as one comprehends the Wilshire school, immediately this question arises: "How can I convey this insight to anyone else, especially those on the other coast of the gulf?" Collingwood and Fingarette chose didactic, discursive academic dialogue. Wittgenstein favored aphoristic writing and direct conversation with other persons. James and Peirce were somewhat in between those two methods. Percy wrote novels (and essays that one feels are almost parts of novels). Wilshire has developed a blend of these methods. He begins with personal, journal-like passages in which he describes his direct experiences as he came to have insights about the problem of addiction. Then he follows through with a William Jamesian didactic style thick with additional discernment, a style in which, surprisingly, a reader often feels directly addressed. *We two human beings are actually in close discussion*, or so one feels as reader.

What is Wilshire's chief insight?

It is important to note that there are many insights. I can't recall any other book recently read that forced constant stopping almost every paragraph to whack my knee in glee or ponder over another great break-through thought; so, in that way the book was slow reading — but for reflective thinking, this book creates a highly prized condition.

The master insight is into universal human nature. Here it is from Wilshire's Prologue:

...how [shall we] locate what we usually have no sense we are missing [in contemporary urban life]?

Human life was formed through millions of years in which our human and prehuman ancestors survived only by coping with wild Nature. By the Paleolithic era, humans made sense of wilderness in story, art, religion, and primal technology. Even when terrified at times, they probably did not feel emotionally empty. I strongly suggest that on one level we still hunger for primal excitement, but the hunger is partially suppressed and confused by overlayings of later agricultural, industrial, and now electronic life.

These days humankind's relationship to wilderness is strained and ambiguous. I think that *addictions* stem from breaking the participatory bond our species has had with regenerative source, with wild Nature over the ages — kinship with plants and animals, with rocks, trees, and horizons. Even terror is a bond with what terrifies. In such moments we are "out of ourselves," ecstatic, spontaneous, full of the swelling

presences of things. Addictions try to fill the emptiness left by the loss of ecstatic kinship. They are substitute gratifications that cannot last for long — slavishly repeated attempts to keep the emptiness at bay. Finally they drain the body of its regenerative powers.²³

At its most general form, Wilshire's claim is that our condition of being widely set-upon by addictions shows that we are thinking wrongly about life. We come to this state because in the main we are bewitched by scientific ways of conceiving solutions to the problems we face in our lives. Wilshire's book, then, can be seen as one that identifies the problem, then gives us a series of lessons on how to escape this bewitchment.

In a volume so rich in potential, I cannot hope to convey all its treasures, so I select a few examples.

First, as a background for chapter ten — “Art and Truth” — consider that according to scientism (the world view Wilshire would liberate us from collectively), art is but a frill, hardly more than an entertainment, a time-kill, an escape — there is no truth in art, for truth is found only in science; art is at best merely symbolic, having no reality in itself.

How widely spread is this outlook in our society? In education, we tend to see art as an extra, something we could easily drop without harm from a child's school studies when the budgets are low. Art, it is said, only serves to give a child some culture — meaning, the child will not embarrass parents when it is time to go to an opera, then engage in polite social conversation while being somewhat informed so that the neighbors are impressed. In and of itself, it is said, art does not enable one to make a living, produces no findings, does nothing but entertain. We allow no grants to artists by the National Science Foundation, but because they have some political clout, we give them a pittance in the National Endowment for the Arts, which we carp at when given an opportunity, and artists appear to offer many such opportunities. Besides, art is a creation of individual humans, and hence completely arbitrary and relative to a group or maybe ultimately to a single individual. Beauty is not real — it is in the eye of each individual beholder, and hence quite relative. And art is created — made — by individuals, so anything a person makes is art in that person's eye. On and on, so goes the prevailing scientific world view about art.

Wilshire's response:

[In making a work of art] the conditions of an experience flow into awareness — the birthing matrix unfolds. And we realize that this is not something subjective, cooked up “in minds,” which is then “expressed.” It is what Nature imparts to us about us and our evolving place within her growing totality. It is a pigment-earth-sky-water-brush-body-speech that has changed but little over many millennia (note the cave paintings

of animals made thirty thousand years ago at Pond d'Arc, France, and ancient sites in southern Africa). In discovering what the world makes of us, discovering where we stand, we echolocate ourselves, find who we are and what we are becoming. Truth on this level is not the desiccated correctness of prosaic ideas and speech. It is truth as body-self true to itself, true to its possibilities for integration, power, and freedom. It is body-self living at the farthest possible remove from addictive cravings.

Artists are kin to shamans, creating in states of regenerative trance or semitrance. Control [in such conditions] lies outside the calculating, fragmentary ego-self.

Might [this] begin to permeate one's daily life in the form of ingrained regenerative ritual? Might we achieve the vivid awareness that every moment may be our last and be eager to live?²⁴

Some things — to borrow a distinction from Wittgenstein — cannot be told, they must be shown: hence, Wilshire's conclusion about art is that "successful art is the arresting showing of the sensuous meaning and experienceable value of things."²⁵ And we don't give up science, which is after all, in one of its major aspects, a great art. "The truths of art must complement those of science."²⁶

Then notice Wilshire's excellent sixth chapter on "Medical Materialism and the Fragmented Grasp of Addiction." His opening sentences:

The conventional medical model of addiction emphasizes natural sciences of the body — biology, physiology, biochemistry, genetics, and so on. These are necessary for understanding addiction but are insufficient. For in order to do its important work of precisely correlating processes and trying to establish causal linkages, science must objectify the body and quantify it. In so doing, however, it masks out crucial features and qualities of body as self.

Body-self's immediate experiencing and minding of the world cannot be objectified or quantified by anyone, not even the person himself or herself. But it is only in this experiencing that the addictive condition really shows itself: the insistent presence of substitute urges and constricting satisfactions that cannot be made fully one's own, that cannot satisfy for long, and which must be repeated on pain of suffering withdrawal.²⁷

Note that Wilshire is *not* rejecting the findings of science. He *is* saying that such findings are *necessary* for understanding and dealing with addiction, however, they alone are not sufficient for a solution — something else is *also* needed.

Here I mark a slight disagreement with Wilshire. It seems to me that at this juncture we should say instead, let us expand science! That would mean that scientism would have to yield its grasp on the very self-image scientists have (Is scientism an addiction that scientists have about their self-images?); so that in a wider concept of science — the disinterested pursuit of truth in any of its forms — we would not limit ourselves in science, as practitioners of materialistic scientism do, to research only into matter or only into causal relations. There are (1) other realities besides matter and (2) other relations besides causes. Of the first, the legal profession or the accounting profession provides many examples: “Mr. Smith, you really are going to jail for drunk driving,” or “Ms. Jackson, you really are out of money, completely broke.” Of the second, ordinary life is full of relations other than causal: “Sam bought a car from Bob for \$500,” or “The food, “ a starving person exclaims, “is finally in my mouth.” In the case of the last example, no matter changes when an apple, which was outside the mouth of the starving man, finally is inside that mouth, but here we have a definite and life-saving noncausal real change of relation between *that* apple and *that* mouth. So we don’t need to surrender science to scientism, we need to kick scientism out of science, so that art and science are reintegrated as they are in the so-called primitive cultures that Tylor and Frazer and Levy-Bruhl and other reductionists have used as objects of scorn.

I think the “primitives“ are about to have their revenge. What do you think?

NOTES

1. R. G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 68-69, emphasis added.

2. This is not *merely* a lapse into metaphorical language. It is a legitimate logical point, namely, that in the process of discovery, as new hypotheses about a puzzling problem begin to be confirmed, the situation is vague in that a researcher is aware that more (and as yet indefinite) information is needed about the object under consideration. On the important difference between ambiguity and vagueness, see Brock, *Peirce’s Logic of Vagueness* (Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1969).

3. This summary of Collingwood’s argument is from *Principles of Art*, pp. 57f.

4. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), chap. 4; James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1922). A good summary of the Tylor/Frazer approach is given in Robert A. Georges and Michael O. Jones, *Folkloristics: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 43-52.

5. Many standard reference works — dictionaries or encyclopedias — routinely cite the Tylor/Frazer hypotheses about magic as if they were facts. Academic researchers still use aspects of the hypotheses as if they were facts: for example,

Wayland D. Hand, "The Magical Transference of Disease," in *Magical Medicine: The Folkloric Component of Medicine in the Folk Belief, Custom, and Ritual of the Peoples of Europe and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 17-42. Additional references to contemporary scholarly works which continue to use this defunct approach may be found in Georges and Jones, *Folkloristics*, p. 57, note 40. Additional discussion on these matters may be found in Ketner, "A Preliminary Survey of the Grammar of 'Folklore': An Introduction to Hominology," *Folklore Forum*, Bibliographic and Special Series number 12 (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1974), pp. 88-96.

6. Compare relevant arguments in Ketner, "Rescuing Science from Scientism: The Achievement of Walker Percy," *The Intercollegiate Journal* 35 (Fall 1999): 22-27.

7. Charles S. Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The 1898 Cambridge Conferences Lectures by Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Kenneth Laine Ketner, with an introduction by K. L. Ketner and Hilary Putnam (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), especially lecture one, "The Conduct of Life."

8. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902).

9. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius — The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972); see also Fingarette, *The Self in Transformation: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, and the Life of the Spirit* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963).

10. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

11. See Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

12. Typescript 211, Cornell University edition of the Wittgenstein manuscripts. The remarks cited here are from *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Remarks on Frazer's Anthropology*, edited and translated by Kenneth Laine Ketner and James Leroy Eigsti, typescript on file Institute for Studies in Pragmatism, Texas Tech University, copyright by the translators. Wittgenstein's examination of Frazer's account of magic is less known than others mentioned above, so a representative sample from the Wittgenstein manuscripts is provided here.

Anyone who is surprised at Wittgenstein's strong language would do well to consider the strength of Frazer's language, for instance, this sentence from *The Golden Bough*, abridged one volume edition, page 13: "It is for the philosophic student to trace the train of thought which underlies the magician's practice; to draw out the few simple threads of which the tangled skein is composed; to disengage the abstract principles from their concrete applications; in short to discern the spurious science behind the bastard art." Earlier on that page Frazer referred to the "magicians" he studies as "undeveloped minds."

13. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 498.

14. Charles Peirce, whose pupil William James had been, took a similar position about the important role of solitude. See Ketner, *His Glassy Essence: An Autobiography of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), pp. 191-193.

15. The approach that James began here owes a great deal to his teacher, mentor, and friend: Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of pragmatism. For an account

Peirce's role in the education of the young William James, see Ketner, *His Glassy Essence*, pp. 272-279. The position that James takes here is a version of the one Peirce worked out: see *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, lecture 1, "The Conduct of Life." One can hardly fail to notice the Emersonian echoes.

16. Ketner, "Rescuing Science from Scientism: The Achievement of Walker Percy."

17. Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, lecture one. See also Ketner, *His Glassy Essence*, p. 262.

18. Ketner, *His Glassy Essence*, p. 298.

19. I am using the sense of the word presented by Collingwood and Wittgenstein and others sympathetic to their insights.

20. It is interesting that I first wrote "addictive substances," as if all the blame were in the substance as causal agent. But this is not true. Someone has to use the substance within an addictive life style. Here we see just how deeply entrenched is the view about human nature opposed by Wilshire.

21. Imagine what the situation in the U.S. would be if all sources of controlled substances were shut down, so that no addict in the country could obtain the substances they had been using. It seems to me that the problem would not be solved, and a large number of sick persons would be on hand. So the second question in this imaginary dialogue may turn out to be a more crucial one.

22. A good introduction to Peirce's Semeiotic — his theory of signs which is a theory of interpretation — is found in Joseph M. Ransdell, "Peirce, Charles Sanders (1839-1914)," in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok et al. (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1986), pp. 673-695.

23. *Wild Hunger*, pp. x-xi.

24. *Wild Hunger*, pp. 173, 174.

25. *Wild Hunger*, p. 182.

26. *Wild Hunger*, p. 185.

27. *Wild Hunger*, p. 95.

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