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Profane Illuminations: Robert Anton Wilson's Hedonic Ascesis

Erik Davis
Pacifica Graduate Institute, Alameda, CA, USA
erik@techgnosis.com

Abstract

The writer Robert Anton Wilson (1932–2007) played a significant intellectual role in the American counterculture in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Drawing from a wide range of discourses, as well as his own occultural fictions and personal experiments in "hedonic engineering," Wilson presented a pluralistic view of reality that combined a pragmatic skepticism with a creative and esoteric embrace of the "meta-programming" possibilities of altered states of consciousness. In his 1975 *Illuminatus!* trilogy, written with Robert Shea, Wilson wove anarchist, psychedelic, and occult themes into a prophetic conspiracy fiction written with a satiric and willfully pulp sensibility. Ritually experimenting with psychedelic drugs and sexual magic – experiences related in his 1977 book *Cosmic Trigger* – Wilson developed a wayward if deeply self-reflexive theory and dialectical method of visionary practice, one that, amidst the paranoia, presented its own deconstructive and libertarian vision of gnosis. This essay contextualizes and unpacks Wilson's visionary pragmatism in terms of Foucault's roughly contemporaneous notion of "technologies of self," later elaborated by Peter Sloterdijk as "anthropotechnics." It also traces the specific debts that Wilson owed to other esoteric and psychedelic technologists of the self, including Aleister Crowley, Timothy Leary, and John Lilly.

Keywords

1   Technologist of the Self

Robert Anton Wilson, who died in 2007, was an American novelist, essayist, and cognitive prankster, whose singular, playful, and erudite texts make him one of the most stimulating and original popular thinkers situated within the American counterculture. Wilson's novels, especially the seminal 1975 *Illuminatus!* trilogy that he wrote with Robert Shea, exploited the lore of conspiracy theories and occult secret societies to explore philosophical, political, and esoteric themes with a satiric and willfully pulp sensibility influenced by American vernacular humor, pornography, modernist fiction, Sci-Fi, and the druggy slapstick of underground comics. Wilson was also an iconoclastic and influential thinker whose witty, probing, and digressive texts – largely distributed through underground publishers like And/Or Press or New Falcon Publications – drew from a wide range of discourses, including existentialism, phenomenology, general semantics, psychology, occultism, sociology, anarchism, and quantum physics. Though his writings have not received the academic recognition they warrant, their mischievous and mind-expanding ethos strongly marked a number of discourses that coursed through or emerged from the counterculture, including chaos magic, transhumanism, and "New Edge" cyberculture.

But while he actively participated in the American occult revival, Wilson largely retained a skeptical, freethinking, and satirical temperament and had little truck – with a few exceptions – with prophetic claims, esoteric schools, or spiritual masters. In this he extends, in non-collectivist mode, the historical current memorably articulated by Art Kleps, the "head Boo Hoo" of the Neo-American Church, one of the more influential (and satiric) acid religions of

Born in 1932, Wilson did not belong to the youth culture of the sixties, nor does his work bring the entailments one might expect from a countercultural intellectual writing about politics, philosophy, and the occult. In no way a man of the left, Wilson described himself in 1973 as "a spokesman for an extreme right-wing libertarianism that prides itself on being more radical than left-wing anarchism."[1] Part of this radicalism involved his study and personal exploration of what one might call the "limit experiences" of the counterculture, including experimentation with psychedelics, liberated sexuality, occult practices, and altered states of consciousness. Though he did not often speak of "gnosis" proper, his work in *Illuminatus!* and elsewhere makes it clear that he saw such experiences as resonating and reflecting the esoteric history and contemporary understanding of illumination.

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[1]   Wilson 1973, 69. For a popular historical account of psychedelia within American libertarianism, see Doherty 2007.

the sixties. Critiquing the "programming" proffered by Asian gurus so popular in the day, Kleps hewed instead to a "more honorable (if less popular) western history of visionary and mystical experience coupled with the vigorous advocacy of human liberty and political radicalism of every kind."[2]

Wilson's thought is arguably too discursive perhaps to be considered "philosophy" as such. He had little use for either metaphysical systems or mystical obscurantism, and, as a student of Alfred Korzybski's general semantics, distrusted language's capacity to adequately represent the world. Wilson also rejected some of the logical axioms that ground rationalism, often railing against the *tertium non datur* and offering up in its stead an indeterminate "maybe logic" of the excluded middle whose tricksy indeterminacy – somewhat indiscriminately applied – underlies both his humor and his sometimes squirrelly arguments. But he was no irrationalist, or mere mystic of paradox. Instead, Wilson embraced a skeptical empiricism that framed both ontological and epistemological questions in pragmatic, pluralist, relativist, and radically (as opposed to socially) constructionist terms. In the prologue to the 1986 edition of his book *Cosmic Trigger* (first published 1977), Wilson argued that

> the only 'realities' (plural) that we actually experience and can talk meaningfully about are perceived realities – realities involving ourselves as editors – and they are all relative to the observer, fluctuating, evolving, capable of being magnified and enriched, moving from low resolution to hi-fi, and do not fit together like the pieces of a jig-saw into one single Reality with a capital R.[3]

Here we can identify a few key Wilsonian elements, all of which can be seen as modes of illumination that radically reframe esoteric understandings of gnosis. One is a pronounced skepticism that remains operationally open to personal experience as a vehicle of discovery and invention. Another is a profound pluralism that willfully multiplies the various "reality tunnels" that constitute the social, ideological, and cultural field into a kind of ontological chaos. Finally, Wilson puts the nervous system in the driver's seat of a radical constructionism that embraces technical manipulation – "editing" – and the cybernetic language of information processing and feedback. What results is an observer-driven reality whose vertiginous relativism Wilson felt no compulsion to paper over with ethical or ontological guarantees. Riffing on Heisenberg's Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics, Wilson sometimes

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2   Kleps 1971, 22.

3   Wilson 19s86, iv.

referred to his position as "neurological model agnosticism."[4] Though harkening back to William James, Wilson's thought can also be considered an exemplary popular articulation of the general "postmodern" turn that took place across diverse fields of thought in the seventies, as well as a more cognitive and reflexive articulation of the "epistemological individualism" of the New Age movement that his work both paralleled and resoundingly mocked.[5]

There are both critical and productive consequences of Wilson's thought. In negative terms, Wilson called for a "guerilla ontology" that critiqued, rejected, and made fun of the normative discourses or "reality tunnels" that dominate modern society, cultural behavior, and individual psychology. On the flip side, Wilson trumpeted the creative, hedonistic, and libertarian possibilities of reflexive reality-construction. Here Wilson was particularly influenced by two concepts that emerged from the upper echelons of psychedelic discourse: Timothy Leary's notion of "hedonic engineering" and John Lilly's concept of "meta-programming." Though both these figures had their own relationship with esoteric currents, Wilson was more deeply marked by the occult revival, and held that "mystical" states of unification and other visionary experiences – including encounters with seemingly preternatural intelligences – were more-or-less programmable forms of ecstasy that lie on a hedonic-cognitive continuum.

I would like to briefly contextualize and unpack Wilson's pragmatics in terms of Foucault's roughly contemporaneous notion of the "technologies of self." Over the course of his career, Foucault for the most part gave pride of place to what he called "technologies of domination": concrete institutions and discourses (or, earlier, "epistemes") which deterministically constitute the subject through various assemblages of power, knowledge, and biopolitical regulation. In the mid-seventies, when he began spending more and more time in California, Foucault embarked on a history of sexuality that in turn staged a significant turn in his thought, away from structures of domination and towards an analysis of those methods and practices whereby individuals actively participate in their own subjectification.[6]

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4 Very roughly, the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics suspends ontological questions for the operational assertion that the character of quantum objects is dependent on the instruments used to measure them. In the seventies, Wilson studied quantum physics with the renegade physicists in Berkeley's Fundamental Fysiks Group, whose tale is narrated in Kaiser 2011. As such, Wilson paralleled the emerging New Age discourse of quantum physics, although he tended to emphasize its paradoxical character and epistemological limitations rather than the holistic interdependence argued for in books like Capra 1975.

5 For more on "epistemological individualism" and the New Age, see Heelas 1996.

6 Arguably, the late Foucault's work cannot be extricated from his personal experience of California in the late seventies and early eighties. Here Foucault dropped LSD for the first time and explored the "creation of new pleasures" through innovative "postsexual" S&M

Foucault focused his research in late antiquity, and particularly in the tension between the Stoic "care of the self" and a subsequent Christian "truth game" that subjugated the self in light of a confessional logic of transcendence and imperious asceticism. In both cases, Foucault insisted that knowledge and belief are not separate from specific practices or "technologies of the self," which he defined as those "techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power."[7]

Such techniques do not only help engender the subject; they also contribute to what Foucault calls "forms of experience." Though the postwar French analysis of the subject that Foucault participated in had moved decisively away from phenomenology, the study of sexuality and the "aesthetics of existence" encouraged Foucault to subject the events of experience themselves to his archaeological method. In order to avoid producing yet another determinist deconstruction of consciousness, Foucault had to establish an operator or singularity that, without invoking phenomenology, remained "irreducible" to "the concrete determinations of social existence." For Foucault, this operator was thought itself. "There is no experience that is not a way of thinking and cannot be analyzed from the viewpoint of the history of thought."[8]

Indeed, experience as such only steps away from the matrix of social determinations by way of "the forms, transformations, and events of thought." As such, thought can be conceived, not as abstract cognition, but as a framework of subjectification that runs on three axes, each of which imply articulation, decision, and what Niklas Luhmann would call the "cut" an observer makes in order to establish distinctions. These axes consist of "questions of the true and false, of the acceptance or rejection of rules, and of relations to the self and others."[9] While these three axes are of course intimately intertwined with various social, institutional, and discursive assemblages, Foucault's historical identification of "technologies of the self" suggests that the subject is, to use

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practices, which included the inculcation of extreme, drug-fueled altered states. While Foucault insisted at the time that his new object of study was not the "California cult of the self," he was referring to the essentialism and rhetoric of authenticity that marked so many New Age and self-help currents. See Foucault 1998, 271. He did not acknowledge – or quite likely was not aware of – rival California technologies of the self that precisely exceeded the self. For further reflections on Foucault in California, see Chytry 2013, 110–18.

7 Foucault 1997, 177.

8 Foucault 1998, 201.

9 Foucault 1998, 201.

a contemporary term, also able to hack itself, to mobilize the reflexivity of thought by putting its own contingent determinations to the test in an iterative process of training or learning.

For a historian of religions, Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self" provides an exceptionally tempting tool of analysis. In *You Must Change Your Life*, to take a recent example, Peter Sloterdijk modifies Foucault's concept into the notion of "anthropotechnics." Provocatively, Sloterdijk claims that religions as such don't exist; what exists "are variously misinterpreted anthropotechnic practice systems and sets of rules for molding one's inward and outward behavior."[10] These "spiritual regimens," which the cybernetically-canny Sloterdijk also characterizes as forms of feedback, help humans construct and maintain "symbolic immune systems and ritual shells."[11] But they also construct and maintain what we might call, modifying Foucault's formulation, "forms of religious experience."

Of course, the highly influential category of "religious experience" has been heavily attacked in the study of religion of late, with many arguing that we need to disaggregate the rhetoric of religion from our assessment of empirical experiences that may or may not be constructed after the fact as "religious." Nonetheless, I am inspired by Foucault's mention of "supernatural power" above to posit forms of *extraordinary experience*, or "gnosis," that gain at least some of their consistency and coherence from esoteric or occult discourses, both in antiquity and in Wilson's seventies milieu. Wouter Hanegraaff, for example, points out that the ancient Hermetic writings, whose rediscovery helped catalyze the emergence of modern esotericism in the Renaissance, continuously refer to "specific bodily conditions combined with unusual states of consciousness."[12]

Unfortunately, Foucault pays little attention to Hermeticism, mystery religions, or Gnosticism – ancient currents whose visionary and "mystical" anthropotechnics would help inspire the various revivals of occult thought and practice in the modern era. That said, in a 1982 lecture at the College de France, Foucault did offer some intriguing comments on the Neoplatonic tradition. Foucault writes that the Neoplatonic "care of the self" finds realization in self-knowledge, but specifically in a knowledge of the self *as* divine. Here the technology of the self becomes an access point to a more mystical apprehension of reality. In turn, Neoplatonism's anthropotechnics becomes "the leaven, the soil, the climate" for a range of spiritual movements, including Gnosticism.

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10   Sloterdijk 2013, 84.
11   Sloterdijk 2013, 3.
12   Hanegraaff 2013, 95.

This is all well known. But Foucault also makes an intriguing observation about Neoplatonism's "double game," which plays spiritual experience and the question of knowledge off against one another. The double game is effected by "continuously and repeatedly raising the question of the necessary conditions of spirituality for access to truth and, at the same time, reabsorbing spirituality in the movement of knowledge alone, of knowledge of the self, of the divine, and of essences."[13] Such a game can be played seriously, but it can also be played playfully, and it is precisely the ludic tension between esoteric experience and "knowledge alone" that founds Robert Anton's Wilson's occult "maybe logic."

2   Turning On

Born and raised in a working-class Catholic family in Brooklyn, Wilson became a committed philosophical materialist as a teenager, dabbling in Marxism and studying engineering and mathematics at New York University. In his twenties, he underwent various courses of psychotherapy and studied existentialism, phenomenology, anarchism, and quantum mechanics. In the early sixties, after reading a positive article about psychedelics in the conservative *National Review*, Wilson embarked on an extensive exploration of peyote and eventually LSD. In 1964, he traveled as a journalist to Millbrook, in upstate New York, to meet Timothy Leary, who would become a life-long friend and collaborator. In 1965, Wilson became an editor at *Playboy*, a job he kept until 1971, when he briefly moved to Mexico before relocating to the Bay Area. Though he later earned a degree in psychology, Wilson remained an independent author and freelance writer for the last decades of his life. His blue-collar beginnings, his journalistic disposition towards entertaining (and sometimes hasty) writing, and the wayward bouts of poverty he experienced raising a family as an underground intellectual helped inform the down-to-earth character of both his writing and his unusually empathic libertarian politics.

Wilson's first significant book, published in 1973 through Playboy Press, was *Sex & Drugs: A Journey Beyond Limits*. Unlike his later essays, the book was a strictly commercial endeavor, and the paperback edition features a kaleidoscopic image of a woman in ecstasy alongside an equally alluring question for an era when countercultural mores were invading the mainstream: "Are drugs the answer to better sex?" Wilson's answer, however, has as much to do with esoteric religion and occult experience as it does with erotic techniques

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13   Foucault 2005, 76–78.

or psychoactive substances. In order to provide a framework for organizing and navigating the intense alterations of consciousness associated with the combination of sex and psychoactive drugs (especially cannabis and psychedelics), Wilson turns to both Asian tantric traditions and Western magic, both of which he presents as collections of instrumental anthropotechnics. "There is no area of new perception and expanded awareness discoverable through peyote (or LSD or similar drugs) that cannot also be reached by techniques well known to Oriental yogis and Western occultists."[14]

In presenting the aim of such techniques, Wilson does not invoke a groovy language of enlightenment, satori, or union with Godhead, but instead offers a hedonic or technical language of the nervous system. Even the rare and glorious experience of "unification," the ecstatic collapse of subject and object, is here described in cybernetic terms rather than "spooky or metaphysical" ones. Wilson brings up the example of Ross Ashby's homeostat, one of the first devices designed to learn from and adapt to its surroundings. As Wilson explains, the homeostat is not a model of an isolated animal, but an "animal-in-an-environment." For Wilson, the experiences of fusion with God or the universe described by mystics and heads alike represent "precisely the shift of attention from the conscious ego to the previously unconscious organism-environment feedback network."[15]

Like many psychologists in the seventies, experimental or otherwise, Wilson was open to many parapsychological possibilities, and this controversial topic complicates any portrayal of him as a strict naturalist. At the same time, Wilson looks forward to the sorts of reductive socio-cognitive accounts of "religious" phenomenology that are so pervasive today, whether from popular science writers, from neuroscientists studying meditation and other altered states, or from the legions of skeptics devoted to smoking out religion from one of its last redoubts: personal experience. However, it is important to emphasize that Wilson's project – which culminates in fascinating texts like *Prometheus Rising* (1983) and *Quantum Psychology* (1990) – is not concerned with reductionist explanations or naturalism per se.

Instead, he embraced a radical empiricism whose skeptical, anti-metaphysical stance did not shut down in advance more outlandish ontological possibilities. By bringing cognitive and social scientific approaches into the framework of his more romantic and esoteric hedonism, and by positioning himself between skepticism and the New Age, Wilson's "maybe logic" – his explicit if informal attempt to reject the *tertium non datur* – also confounds

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14   Wilson 1973, 16–17.
15   Wilson 1973, 253.

the seemingly easy distinction between etic and emic discourse. And though Wilson's rather anarchistic protocols of truth, rule, and relation do not resemble the more sober procedures that Foucault associates with Stoic or Christian anthropotechnics – Wilson's skepticism, in fact, brings him more closely to classic Pyrronhism – his procedures were not just phenomenological techniques of pleasure or intensity, but games of truth that played with the very distinction between truth and false.

Wilson owes much of his skeptical and experimental mysticism to the work of two pioneering psychedelic intellectuals, Timothy Leary and John Lilly. Leary is a complicated and contradictory figure who, like Marshall McLuhan, did his intellectual legacy no favors by so wantonly engaging in the popular media sphere. While Leary's own social-science skepticism is quite evident in the transhumanist work he produced following the "Starseed Transmissions" of 1973, it is obscured in the sixties by his guru persona and by writings that cannibalized the sorts of texts – like Lao Tzu, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and the *I Ching* – that held pride of place in the postwar canon of spiritual seeking.

Though the sixties Leary certainly took his own mystic turn, his use of religious or esoteric discourse emerged directly from his earlier institutional practice as a secular social psychologist. Leary's first book, 1957's *The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality*, offered a dense personality typology cast in terms of social roles and interpersonal scenarios that both resisted and absorbed the reigning behaviorist models of the day. Indeed, as Wilson himself perceptively noted, Leary followed Skinner in rejecting the "poetry" of Freud and Jung, but took a step beyond Skinner's mechanistic "Newtonian physics" by embracing a relativistic and interpersonal "Einsteinean" webwork devoted to "describing differing reality-coordinates experienced by different bodies as they exchanged signals in space-time."[16]

In 1960, Leary discovered psilocybin mushrooms, and began the freewheeling experimentation that contributed to his ejection from Harvard in 1963. One snapshot of Leary's thought midway through this transition is provided by a talk he delivered to the International Congress of Applied Psychology in August 1961. Like other psychologists of the era, Leary saw social life as a kind of "game," by which he meant, not an opportunity for free play, but a rule-based set of learned sequences and culture behaviors with established roles, linguistic templates, and associated values. "All behavior involves learned games" he insisted, noting that the institutions and social regulatory functions he referred to as "power" are generally not interested in individuals

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16   Wilson 1986, 37.

recognizing these games.[17] (Here we cannot help but be reminded of Foucault's own notions of "truth games" and the *disposatif*.)

In his 1961 talk, however, Leary pushed the concept of game far beyond ordinary social interactions: the "subject-object game" structured ordinary perception and science alike, while the "most treacherous and tragic game of all" was the ego game. Defining the "mystic" or visionary as the one who "sees clearly the game structure of behavior," Leary outlined a pragmatic and liberationist program of "applied mysticism," one that suggested that "great trauma" can "shatter[] the gamesmanship out of you" and thereby free you up to choose better games.[18]

Leary's mysticism also reflects his exposure to the religious discourse of perennialism, which he discovered through his friendships with Aldous Huxley and Huston Smith, who taught at nearby MIT. By giving a neurological (and ultimately genetic) spin on perennialism's assertion of the universality of mystical experience, Leary was able to elaborate the game of "applied mysticism" without abandoning social psychology or naturalism. An early example here is *The Psychedelic Experience* from 1964, a highly influential trip guide freely adapted from Evans-Wentz's popular translation (and Theosophical redaction) of Tibet's *Bardo Thodol* literature into the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Leary wrote *The Psychedelic Experience* with his colleagues Richard Alpert and Ralph Metzner, who later explained that Leary's goal was to "take the text of the Tibetans and strip the particular cultural and religious language and rewrite it as a manual."[19]

Constructing a set of "stages" for a typical psychedelic trip, Leary and team then overlaid this map onto the various bardos or "betweens" that, the Tibetan materials hold, await us on the far side of death. All this is clear support for the Buddhist scholar Donald Lopez Jr.'s argument that *The Psychedelic Experience* was an aggressive act of "radical decontextualization" that rested on a perennialist, quasi-scientific "theology" of culturally unmarked and therefore universal mystical states.[20] True enough, but, in addition to ignoring the decontextualization already at work in Tibetan appropriations of Indian tantra (creative mis-readings that helped generate the *Bardo Thodol* texts), Lopez misunderstands the pragmatic thrust of Leary's text, which was not concerned

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17   Leary 2014, 53.
18   Leary 2014, 53.
19   Schou 2010, 28.
20   Lopez 1999, 71–85.

with establishing some perennialist ontology but with fashioning operational protocols out of Tibet's visionary praxis.[21]

Though *The Psychedelic Experience* is a dated and often silly text, one that all of its authors later abjured, it did introduce one of the most influential technical principles in the design of psychedelic protocols. This is the notion of "set and setting," which holds that the content and dynamics of a trip are fundamentally reflexive; that is, they depend on one's conscious and unconscious expectations and state of mind (*set*) in synergy with the material, atmospheric, and aesthetic conditions of the environment (*setting*). This model bears comparison to Foucault's notion of *disposatif* and can certainly be used to deconstruct the phenomenology of a trip after the fact. But Leary also recognized that this reflexive condition could also be exploited to "construct a 'program'" for a trip in advance.[22]

"One can envision a high art [of] programming psychedelic sessions, in which symbolic manipulation and presentations would lead the voyager through ecstatic visionary Bead Games."[23] Such a design program – coupled with the psychoactive chemical catalyst – can certainly be seen as a "technology of the self" in the sense of an anthropotechnics that allows humans to participate in their own subjectification. Leary's use of the term "ecstasy" here also reminds us that, for him, this "high art of programming" lies on an erotic or neo-tantric continuum with his more demotic and linear notion of "hedonic engineering," which he once defined simply as "designing one's life for pleasure through chemical turn-ons and turn-offs."[24]

As such, Leary's take on psychedelic anthropotechnics to some degree decouples psychedelic forms of experience from thought and its determinations of principle, rule, and self. What results from this decoupling, it could be said ungenerously, is more game than truth. That said, Leary and Wilson were hardly nihilists, and their hedonic engineering might better be seen as a kind of pragmatic and immanent "ethics," a creative and engaged practice of pleasure that recalls a more "Deleuzian" ethics based on energies, flows, plateaus, and intensities. If Leary and Wilson were anarchist hedonists, I would suggest, they were *principled* anarchist hedonists, in pursuit of their own heteronormative versions of what Foucault, discussing the hardcore S&M practices he himself

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21   For more on this, see Davis 2018, 47–73.

22   Leary 1964, 139.

23   Leary 1964, 139. The Bead Game is a reference to a visionary and intellectual game played in Herman Hesse's novel *Magister Ludi*, an important source for Leary's comparativism and ecstatic notion of game-playing.

24   Cited in Miller 1991, 119.

enjoyed, called "the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously."[25]

The hedonic approach to psychedelic technologies of the self leaves a number of philosophical questions hanging. Some of these were taken up with more formal and critical rigor by another radical psychedelic intellectual who influenced Wilson: the American physician, neuroscientist, and psychoanalyst John Lilly. Born in 1915, Lilly attended Caltech and did neurophysiological work at the NIMH in 1950s. Here he performed research on the direct electrical stimulation of neurons, studies that drew the attention of the CIA, then knee-deep in MK-Ultra and other attempts to explore extreme behavior modification and mind control.[26] In the fifties, Lilly also began studying how the brain and mind behave when freed from external perceptual input. To this end, Lilly constructed the first immersive sensory deprivation tank later one of the key technologies of the self among consciousness explorers (or psychonauts) of the seventies and eighties.

The intelligence agencies were also interested in the tank as an interrogation tool, but tensions over Lilly's insistence on keeping his briefings and research unclassified led him to abandon his position in 1958. He turned to the study of dolphin intelligence, work that was fictionalized in the film *Day of the Dolphin* and which raised questions about communication with non-human intelligences that would haunt him as well in his psychedelic work. When LSD was still unscheduled, Lilly began to explore the drug in conjunction with the isolation tank, research that led to his fascinating book *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Biocomputer*, one of the best examples we possess of an inner empiricism coupled with the active cultivation of limit experiences. Though written in the late sixties, the book was not widely available until 1972, at which point Lilly had largely shifted his allegiance to the counterculture, leading workshops at the Esalen Institute and studying with the Gurdjieffean teacher Oscar Ichazo at his Arica school in Chile.

Influenced by cybernetics, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology, *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Biocomputer* is written in a dry, "objective" style whose only rhetorical flourishes are neologisms like "supraself metaprograms" and occasional references to science fiction. The book presents a complex portrait of the mind – and the "realities" it engenders in the absence of normal stimuli – as a nested hierarchy of programs and controls that is itself subject to manipulation and experiment. The tank enabled the "biocomputer" to decouple its senses from the usual environment, until "the

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25   Foucault 1998, 165.
26   An exhaustive discussion of MK-Ultra can be found in Marks 1978.

ordinary perception spaces, the ordinary projection spaces, [become] filled with cognition and conation processes."

Poetic descriptions like Freud's "oceanic feeling" and the acid mystic's "at one with the universe" are, from a "more reasonable point of view," now seen to result from "one's thought and feeling expanding into the circuitry in one's computer usually occupied by perception of external reality."[27] Re-inscribing this "reasonable point of view" was one of Lilly's core protocols. Through a process of "ruthless self-analysis," modeled in part on his own extensive experience of psychoanalysis, Lilly would attempt to deconstruct and disenchant his experiences after the fact. Lilly also experimented with the pre-session adoption of different "basic beliefs" by the "self-metaprogrammer" (the "I"), including "as if," science-fictional beliefs in the possibility of communication with non-human intelligences or cosmic controllers. In perhaps the most widely cited summation of his research, Lilly wrote that "In the province of the mind, what one believes to be true is true or becomes true, within certain limits to be found experientially and experimentally. These limits are further beliefs to be transcended. In the mind, there are no limits."[28]

In *Sex & Drugs*, Wilson enthusiastically cites this statement, whose radical social implications he draws out by comparing it to a celebrated (and here paraphrased) graffito on the walls of Paris in 1968: *Think of your desires as realities*.[29] Wilson, however, undercuts this ontological romance by further defining Lilly's claim as an "*operational* statement." That is, rather than a truth "known to the theoretician or the pure scientist," Lilly's assertion is pragmatic, "a generalization useful to the troubleshooter dealing with actual events in the laboratory. (In this case, of course, the laboratory is the human head.)"[30] Whether or not this is an adequate definition of operationalism, it certainly reflects the constructionist, anti-metaphysical bias that Wilson inherited from both Leary and Lilly, a bias that allowed him to both embrace and radically reframe esoteric experience. As Wilson explains, when Leary, Lilly, and a handful of others "saw gods and heavens and experienced 'occult' energies, they did not take these dramatic events at face value."[31] Instead, they entered such encounters into a more reflexive game of truth, play, and forms of experience.

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27   Lilly 1972, 32–33.
28   Lilly 1972, xii.
29   The original phrase is *Je prends mes désirs pour la réalité car je crois en la réalité de mes désirs*. Vodovnik 2013, 92.
30   Wilson 1973, 57–58.
31   Wilson 1973, 246.

3   Turning In

A crucial feature of Wilson's psychedelic anthropotechnics was the productive role that fiction played as a ludic tool of metaprogramming and an alternative to religious or metaphysical claims. Both Leary and Lilly refer to science fiction as an important influence on their theorizing, but Wilson went much farther in actually writing prankster novels that compounded fiction with history and esotericism in ways that strongly anticipate, and arguably seed, more recent examples of "hyper-real religion."[32] Wilson's most important and most experimental fiction remains the *Illuminatus!* trilogy, co-written with Robert Shea (another *Playboy* editor) in the late 1960s and early 1970s but not published until 1975. Inspired by the wilder conspiracy theories mailed in by readers of the Playboy Forum, the two authors wove together a restless, baggy, satirical "fairy tale for paranoids" famously described by Greil Marcus as "the longest shaggy dog joke in literary history."

The novel follows various characters – whose identities occasionally switch mid-paragraph – as they discover, combat, and propagate the feverish plots of the Illuminati, a conspiratorial global organization secretly run by a German rock band called the American Medical Association. The Illuminati lie behind the assassinations of JFK and other sixties figures, and may or may not be responsible for a myriad of other plots and possibilities the novel teasingly and only partly unpacks. The ultimate aim of the organization is to "immanentize the eschaton," a phrase popularized by William F. Buckley and drawn from the conservative historian Eric Voegelin, who warned against a modern utopian drive to forcibly realize the millennial kingdom on earth. In addition to its dense political weave, *Illuminatus!* is also saturated with esotericism, including dense and well-informed historical threads about Freemasonry and ceremonial magic, copious references to H.P. Lovecraft and other supernatural fiction writers, and numerous, generally funny scenes of sexual ritual and pop Satanism.

The white hats in the novel are the Discordians, an underground cabal who worship and foment chaos, practice sex magic, and are headed by the submarine captain Hagbard Celine (who may or may not be the Illuminatus Primus in disguise). Wilson and Shea based the Discordians on an actual Discordian Society, then one of the counterculture's more obscure, satirical, and innovative engagements with anarchist politics and religious mysticism. Initially the invention of two Americans, Gregory Hill and Kerry Thornley (aka Malaclypse

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32   For a discussion of hyper-real religion and Discordianism, see Cusack 2010, 27–52. For general overview of the discourse, see Possamai 2012.

the Younger and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, who both appear in *Illuminatus!*), Discordianism argues that chaos is at least as fundamental to reality as order, and that it should be honored with paradox, contradiction, antinomian anarchism, and an irony so profane (or so silly) that it suggests the sacred.

The principal Discordian text, first published in 1965 in five copies and revised a number of times and by numerous hands, is the *Principia Discordia*, a parodic (and possibly sincere) collage of cartoons, slogans, rubber stamps, and org charts enlivened with chaos myths, mystic paradox, and Beatnik Zen. An early "open source" religious current, Discordianism was a non-zero-sum game that invited anyone to play. For his part, Wilson declared himself a Discordian pope – you can too – and founded his own Ancient Bavarian Illuminati subsect in the early 70s.

Though *sui generis*, Discordianism also needs to be seen in the context of the contemporary development of American Paganism, which underwent a period of creative ferment and expansive self-definition in the late sixties and early seventies, especially in California, where many Discordians lived. In *Drawing Down the Moon*, her social history of American witchcraft, Margot Adler describes Discordianism as a "religion of paradox and play," and credits Thornley with first using the term "Pagan" to refer to contemporary earth mystics. Along with their Discordian activities, which included writing a lot of prank letters, Wilson and his wife Arlen also began to explore Northern California's occult demimonde, socializing with ceremonial magicians and joining the Stone Moon coven and the Moebius Circle.[33] Both of these small groups were spin-offs of the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn, who identified themselves in one 1972 publication as "an assemblage of natural anarchists, bootstrap witches and alienated intelligentsia" – the word "bootstrap" referring to the fact that, unlike more orthodox Wiccan covens, the group embraced the fact that they were inventing their religion whole cloth (a feature that no doubt appealed to Wilson).[34]

But the most important occult influence on Wilson was Aleister Crowley. In 1970, none other than Alan Watts recommended that Wilson read Crowley, whose texts were becoming more available with the publishing boom in occult titles. Though Wilson was impressed by Crowley's outrageous character and his prophetic hedonism, he was particularly interested in the pragmatic and even reductionist thread of skeptical instrumentalism that runs, inconsistently, throughout Crowley's work.

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33   Kelly 2014, 64.
34   Adler 1986, 162.

To appreciate Wilson's appropriation of Crowley, we need to briefly look at this "scientific" discourse, which lies right on the surface of Crowley's work. For example, Crowley described his esoteric system as "Scientific Illuminism," while the motto of the magical order he founded in 1907, the A∴A∴, was "The Method of Science, the Aim of Religion." As Olav Hammer argues, such invocations of "science" were a standard practice for esotericists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Claiming Knowledge*, Hammer offers an extensive critique of this esoteric "parasitism" on scientific discourse, particularly by the Theosophists. Most esotericists of the day, he writes, understand "science" to mean "the body of statements, the terminology and/or the technical applications of science."[35]

However, this notion of science ignores what Hammer and many others argue is the most essential characteristic of scientific practice: its method of inquiry. Defining this method as "intersubjective, repeatable, and error-correcting," Hammer cites Carl Sagan: "the method of science, as stodgy and grumpy as it may seem, is far more important than the findings of science."[36] Although studies of science in the wake of Thomas Kuhn have significantly qualified Hammer's idealized Popperian view of scientific progress (especially in regard to the concrete practice of falsification), the scientific method remains open, self-correcting, and ultimately provisional.[37] And it is this method, Hammer states, that one "rarely if ever finds in Esoteric movement texts."[38]

Unfortunately, Hammer spends almost no time on Crowley's "method of science." On the surface, of course, Crowley's motto is perhaps not terribly far from William Q. Judge's roughly contemporaneous claim that Theosophy was a "scientific religion and a religious science."[39] But there is an important difference between these assertions. Unlike Judge, Crowley took the stance that it was possible to base an experiential spiritual school like the A∴A∴ on "practice and methods" rather than theory or belief.[40] This pragmatic methodology was, he claimed, sufficient to achieve Illumination, or "Spiritual Experience."

As a methodology, of course, this does not resemble normative applications of scientific method, since any "results" imply an ineradicable subjective reflexivity that severely hamstrings conventional interpretations of repeatability and falsification. Moreover, Crowley was hardly immune to weaving in any

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35   Hammer 2004, 204.
36   Hammer 2004, 204.
37   See T.M. Luhrmann's brief but insightful discussion of "method" in Luhrmann 1991, 123–25. And see Tambiah 1990, 140–54.
38   Hammer 2004, 204.
39   Cited in Hammer 2004, 222.
40   Crowley 1989, 296.

number of supernatural or even prophetic convictions. Nonetheless, Crowley's invocation of "practice and methods," and his sometimes highly reductionist neurological language – he once referred to the spirits of the Goetia as "portions of the human brain" – represent a reflexive, pragmatic, and quasi-naturalistic attitude toward esoteric experience, and stands as one of the earliest articulations of the occult inner empiricism continued by Wilson.[41]

In an important article on Crowley's naturalism, Egil Asprem identifies three central elements of Crowley's method: "the careful use of a magical record to stress the externalization of personal experience which makes inter-subjectivity possible, the conception of rituals as scientific experiments, and the idea of testing obtained results through inter-subjectively verifiable methods."[42] However one might judge the rigor of Crowley's method, Asprem argues conclusively that we should recognize his pragmatism as sincere and based on his own philosophical and esoteric influences. In part, Crowley's pragmatism reflects his early exposure to Theravadan Buddhism – whose dry and disenchanting operations of self-analysis were typically interpreted in his era as signs of a "rational religion" – but its origins lie equally in the practical and psychological orientation of the Order of the Golden Dawn, where a young Crowley cut his magical teeth.

While the Golden Dawn's interest in initiatory rituals, ancient gods, and recondite angelic tongues certainly reflects a romantic reaction to the positivist intellectual orientation of fin-de-siecle Britain, the order's pursuit of the mysteries was also, as Alex Owen argues, "entirely regulated by reason."[43] Rejecting the passive acceptance of incoming preternatural forces represented by Spiritualism, the Golden Dawn occultists instead stressed the control of the mind and the active cultivation of will even as they explored the intuitive, hallucinatory, or irrational dimensions of human consciousness (or, as some were learning to call it, the subconscious).

In a crucial passage, Owen clarifies the Golden Dawn's precise partnership of intuition and reason in terms that cannot help but invoke Lilly's meta-programming regimes:

> If we assume the mythopoeic capabilities of the hidden regions of the mind, then advanced occult practice can be understood as an extraordinary and controlled performance of the conscious "I" in a mythos of

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41   For a crucial discussion of Crowley's empiricism and the possible influence on it of William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, see Pasi 2012, 53–88.

42   Asprem 2008, 151.

43   Owen 2004, 239.

mutual unconscious creation. By this reckoning, it is the crucial align-
ment of rational consciousness with the apparently irrational world of
the myth-creating unconscious that produces the powerful experience of
the occult "real."[44]

While such experiences served in part to confirm the reality of occult theo-
ries, a certain instrumental skepticism – a key element of science – played an
important role in the alignment that Owen describes. One of the strongest
examples that Owen provides is from Crowley, who warns astral travelers of
the need to distinguish between "authentic astral phenomena and figments of
personal imagination." Leaving aside the ontological problems raised by this
distinction, what is important to note here are the terms that Crowley uses to
make it: "We must not assert the 'reality' or 'objectivity' of an Astral being on
no better evidence than the subjective sensation of its independent existence.
We must insist on proof."[45] As Asprem points out, Crowley's assessments not
only invoke scientific values of objectivity and proof, but they occur *after the
fact*, breaking down the raw visionary material into a data set for later analy-
sis.[46] In this way, Crowley attempted to undermine the subjective sensation of
supposedly authentic experience that underlies so many esoteric claims in the
name of a skeptical pragmatism.

   In his fictions and essays, Wilson helped propagate this pragmatist version
of Crowley and thereby decisively influenced later appropriations of the magi-
cian's work. Wilson was particularly fond of citing a passage in "Liber O vel
Manus et Sagittae," an instruction manual for the A∴A∴ that seems to prophesy
his own model agnosticism:

> In this book it is spoken of the Sephiroth, and the Paths, of Spirits and
> Conjurations; of Gods, Spheres, Planes, and many other things which
> may or may not exist. It is immaterial whether they exist or not. By doing
> certain things certain results follow; students are most earnestly warned
> against attributing reality or philosophical validity to any of them.[47]

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44   Owen 2004, 182.
45   Crowley 1976, 256.
46   While the tradition of testing and identifying spirits is fundamental to the rites of exor-
      cism and medieval and Renaissance ceremonial magic, Crowley is not demanding proof
      of divine origin but of *independent* origin. For a discussion of testing spirits, see Caciola
      2003, 274–98.
47   Crowley 1976, 247, 375.

Wilson also took Crowley's lessons to heart. Drawn to the encryption and pun-filled misdirection of Crowley texts like *The Book of Lies*, Wilson came to suspect that the secrets that lay at the core of Illuminism and other esoteric traditions were advanced techniques of sexual magic, sometimes amplified by psychoactive drugs. As such, he "determined upon a course of neuro-psychological experiments" that involved rituals, neo-tantric sex, cannabis, and LSD. Ceremonial magic was not the only framework; for some trips, he played a "hypno-tape with positive suggestions on it," programs he lifted from Christian Science, *A Course in Miracles*, and self-help literature.[48]

But even as Wilson played with meta-programming beliefs, he also learned to dodge their implications. In a rare account of his own ritual experience, Wilson describes his performance of Crowley's Mass of the Phoenix – a solo ritual first described in *The Book of Lies* – at a Mendocino farmhouse in 1972. After dropping 250 micrograms of LSD, putting on some Beethoven, Wilson performed the invocation. He was then surrounded by a ring of slavering dog-faced demons who stood out solidly against the room's furniture. Wilson's account is worth quoting in full:

> On one level, I was seriously frightened; but on another level, I felt confident of my hard-learned ability to navigate in the Infernal regions of psychedelic space – or in the qliphotic astral realm, or whatever you want to call this particularly unlovely reality-tunnel. I recalled something from H.P. Lovecraft: "Do not call up any that you cannot put down." This was not helpful. But then I remembered from some book on shamanism: "If you feed Them, they will become Allies instead of Foes."[49]

Here we notice characteristic features of Wilson's anthropotechnics: the indeterminate flicker between different ontologies (psychedelic space vs. qliphotic astral realm; pulp fiction vs. anthropology), the recall and citation of texts, and the "hard-learned ability" that comes with practice. Armed with all this, Wilson conjured up a bunch of shrimp cocktails in his psychedelicized imagination and fed the demons, at which point they transformed into dwarf-sized replicas of the nuns he recalled from grammar school. Laughing, he then closed the circle, feeling, in an echo of Crowley's skepticism, "totally convinced that all the 'entities' invoked in Magick are parts of our own minds." But the evening was not yet through with him. Suddenly, his bed started shaking "like a scene from

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48   Wilson added, "In general, I am much happier than before starting these experiments." Wilson 1996, 55.
49   Wilson 1996, 159.

the Exorcist." It was a mild earthquake. With a further dose of apotropaic irony, Wilson writes, "It would be best to not even think of it as a synchronicity."[50]

4   Dropping Out

"Whoever looks for humans will find ascetics," Sloterdijk writes in his book on anthropotechnics, "and whoever observes ascetics will discover acrobats."[51] In other words, humans are self-practicing creatures whose more creative acts of self-constitution are balancing acts without guarantee. In 1973, in the midst of a hedonic ascesis that involved writing, sex, and drugs, Wilson fell off the wire. A few months after performing the Mass, Wilson's neuro-psychological experiments catalyzed a series of intense synchronicities, robust altered states of consciousness, paranoid thinking, and other manifestations of "high weirdness" that put his anthropotechnics to the test.

In his 1977 book *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati*, arguably Wilson's masterpiece, he describes a profane illumination that arrives as a kind of meta-fictional bleed, as the conspiratorial fictions and historical oddities he had woven into *Illuminatus!* – Crowley, Horus, aliens, the number 23, the occult lore of the Dog Star – began to extend their tendrils into his everyday life. Sometimes he believed that his experiments had catalyzed what Wilson called, using the language of Timothy Leary's psycho-cybernetic model of consciousness, a new evolutionary "circuit" lying *in potentia* in his nervous system. Whatever the cause, from July 1973 until roughly October 1974, Wilson came to inhabit a "reality tunnel" in which an extraterrestrial intelligence from the star system Sirius was sending him telepathic messages.

Though readers of Wilson have been trained to take all his texts with a grain of salt, the vulnerability that Wilson's narrative exposes should encourage us to accept the basics of this account, however good *Cosmic Trigger* functions as a meta-fictional twister. In etic terms, Wilson's apotropaic skepticism was overwhelmed by psychosis, as paranoid semiology and errors of self-reference sucked him out of what can only be called – using a sociological term of art that itself became popular in the seventies – "consensus reality."[52] According to Wilson, he subsequently escaped from what he called "Chapel Perilous" through a recommitment to the specific coordinates of his meta-programming game of truth. "I … decided to safeguard my sanity by choosing the subjective

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50   Wilson 1996, 160.
51   Sloterdijk 2013, 62.
52   The term comes from Berger and Luckmann 1966. See especially p. 3.

theory (*It's all in my head*) and ruthlessly repressed any tendency to speculate further about possible objective theories (*There are super-human forces at work here …*)."[53]

Though we might doubt the simple voluntarism this account implies, Wilson's capacity for "insight" in the midst of psychosis could arguably be seen as the result of his earlier training. Cutting against his own phenomenological experience, Wilson instead asserted the autopoetic capacities of the human nervous system to construct its own reality. Though arguably an act of faith, his re-commitment to the "truth" of naturalism was also tactical, not a rediscovery of rational ground but a situational acrobatic move. In one account of the period written much later, he notes that at the time he turned to one of the "neurological models then current" to explain his experience to himself: the popular seventies discourse of brain lateralization, from which he concluded that his experience amounted to "my over-developed left brain learning to receive signals from the usually 'silent' right brain."[54] Wilson's later admission of the errors of this model shows his over-all commitment to the pragmatic effects of fungible models.

The expansive pluralism of his protocols reminds us that Wilson never claimed simply that it was all "just in the brain." Inspired by parapsychology, Leary's 8-circuit model, and the possible entanglement of consciousness with quantum effects, Wilson hewed to an optimistic and ultimately transhumanist account of the brain that significantly exceeded the boundaries of conventional neuroscience or our era's militant "skepticism." In this, Wilson can be seen as an outlier of the New Age, whose platitudes he often mocked but whose concerns – quantum physics, directed evolution, the Aquarian conspiracy – he overlapped. Indeed, Wilson's philosophical effort may be understood as a socio-cognitive and skeptical corrective to the essential New Age gambit that we "create our own reality," even as he reframed that slogan into a kind of radical constructionism that necessitates the creative and courageous deployments of technologies of the self.

For all the apparent postmodernity of this, it remains illuminating to place Wilson and his transcendental pragmatism within the far longer-running currents of esoteric gnosis, something the author himself does in an appendix to *Illuminatus!* In a brief and totally concocted account, Wilson and Shea outline the Ishmaelian religious training that the legendary Hassan I Sabbah received before founding the Order of the Assassins. In the highest grade of this training, the seeker learns that even personal mystical encounters with the Absolute or

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53   Wilson 1996, 56.
54   Wilson 1996, 57.

God should be subjected "to the most merciless analysis and criticism." A fully realized adept, in this system, was "one who had achieved supreme mystical awareness but refused to make even that into an idol; he was a total atheist-anarchist subject to no authority but his own independent mind."[55]

Here we can understand the ethical claim for Wilson's critical gnosis as a kind of anarchist practice of spiritual freedom, one that maintains its precarious connection to the mythopoetic sublime by refusing to submit to the pressure to resolve such experiences into the frameworks of faith *or* knowledge. In this way, critical gnosis resembles, again, the classic skepticism of Pyrrho, whose relativistic epistemology was designed to deliver a state of *ataraxia*, or tranquility. At the same time, Wilson's "anti-belief system" can be seen as a complement to a sort of ecstatic esoteric hedonism, one in which even gnosis can be "enjoyed" without falling into the clutches of delusion, dogma, or messianic convictions.

Discussing his experience deploying Lilly's metaprogramming scripts during psychedelic sessions, Wilson noted that they encouraged a gullible faith in the mind's secret powers – the familiar psychedelic (and mystical) problem of inflation. Wilson wasn't particularly worried about these temporary states of intense magical thinking however. Once the experiment was over, he tells us, he generally found it easy to re-establish his skeptical stance, though he did note that "skepticism during the experiment prevents any interesting results."[56] In the delicate dance of the ironic imagination, too much doubt would kill the revelatory rush.

Weaving a spiral dance of "maybe logic" between materialism and mysticism, Wilson helped articulate and model a "double game" of skeptical esotericism as an "as if" anthropotechnics capable of extending thought through the very limit experiences that also confront and confound it as non-thought. But why play such a double game? Can we really speak of an ethics here? In his introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault addresses the ethics of what we might call altered states of cognition: "There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all."[57] Perhaps it is best to see the psychedelic anthropotechnics of Wilson and his peers less as programs or protocols, and more as experiments, as experiential probes of both thought and phenomenology – even, if you will, as wayward throws of the dice.

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55   Shea and Wilson 1975, 757.
56   Wilson 1986, 83.
57   Foucault 1985, 8.

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