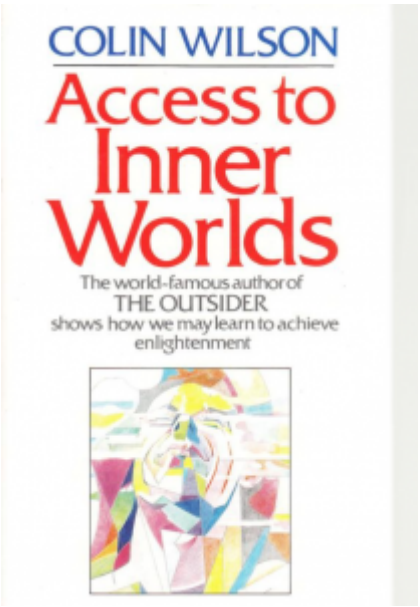
Summary/Review of ‘Access to inner worlds’, by Colin Wilson (1983)



Summary:

Our everyday consciousness is flat and uninspiring because we are only using part of our brains. If we add more effort into how we perceive the world our consciousness will change so that the world will feel more real, alive and exciting.

Colin Wilson (1931-2013) was a prolific writer, having written more than 120 books since the 1950s. Although he published works across many genres – crime, philosophy, the paranormal – one of the repeating themes in his work is the depressing and narrow quality of our everyday consciousness compared to the ‘peak experiences’ of conscious we all have from time to time.

In this book Wilson explores what he believes are the reasons for this, and how we can cure it. Basically what he believes is that there is part of our brain (which he identifies as the left side) that has become over-used and over-developed in our

culture. Its good at logic and routine, but it can make us too robotic, as this part of us is good at learning to perform tasks automatically without much conscious attention. We also become rushed and stressed, as this part of our brain is very time conscious and sensitive to threats and worries. Over-reliance on the left side of the brain has left us feeling not only constantly stressed, but also like life is meaningless.

If we can learn to re-engage the right side of the brain, so that we're using all of our brain's capacity, we can experience a heightened state of consciousness and energy. The book suggests several ways of doing this.

'Access to inner worlds' is subtitled 'The story of Brad Absetz' and is based around Wilson's meeting with Brad Absetz, an American who had moved to Finland, where Wilson had been invited to participate in a conference and series of workshops. The book is a kind of mixture of biography of Absetz, travel story, philosophy and psychology.

This book is incredibly fascinating and examines a subject that is potentially of huge importance and relevance to all of us. Sometimes it is – like a lot of Wilson's books – a little meandering and can feel like he is over-reliant on summarizing the ideas of past writers and philosophers. Also, neuroscience has moved-on since the time the book was published, and some may feel that Wilson's reliance on differences between the left and right cerebral hemispheres is too simplistic. However, he anticipates this criticism, and says (probably quite correctly) that: 'I must emphasize that doubts about split-brain theory make no difference whatever; the difference between the 'two selves' does exist, whether or not they can be closely identified with the left and right.' (P.99)

It's now out of print, but you should be able to find a used copy relatively easily. It's also a very quick read, only 143 pages.

Sadly, Colin Wilson suffered a stroke in 2012, which rendered him unable to speak. And he passed away in 2013.

Chapter summaries:

Ch 1: Beyond left-brain consciousness

We Humans 'live inside our heads' too much, which causes us to worry and blow things out of proportion, as well as stopping us from experiencing the world around us directly. Taken to the extreme, this view can make us feel depressed and that life is meaningless.

Research has shown that the top part of the brain – the cerebral cortex – is actually two brains: the left side (or hemisphere) language, logic and reason, the right with feeling, perception of patterns and intuition. Wilson claims that culture has encouraged Humans to develop their left brains at the expense of their right brain: we have become trapped in the left-brain way of thinking and perceiving the world.

The left brain is more aware of time and moves to a faster pace than the right. However, the two brains can be made to work in synch through speeding up the right brain (through exciting music) or slowing down the left brain (through relaxing). It can also happen through the intense relaxation that we feel when we are suddenly relieved of some big stress or crisis (the famous writer, Graham Greene once experienced this after playing a game of Russian Roulette). The left brain – which so often is involved with performing tasks automatically and dealing with deadline-focused tasks – finally relaxes and the right brain gets a chance to make itself known.

Evolution has made us over-sensitive to possible threats in our environment. The world we live in is safer than that of

our ancestors, yet our brains are still scanning the environment constantly for threats. We have to strongly discipline our negative emotions into not ruling us.

Quotes:

"For more than two thousand years, philosophers have been producing gloomy and negative assessments of Human experience…because these men are great thinkers, we are inclined to take their word for it. Yet we now see that thinking has its own limitations: the limitations of the left brain." (P.19)

"The tendency to become trapped in left-brain consciousness is perhaps the greatest single danger that threatens us as a species. Every year thousands of people commit suicide because they believe 'that is all there is'…(but) as soon as we glimpse this possibility of a balances left-and-right consciousness, we can see it as the beginning of a whole range of new developments in Human consciousness." (P.21-22)

Ch 2: Ten days in Viitakivi

Wilson describes a period when he'd taken on too much work and felt depressed and futile because of it. Then one day the feeling suddenly vanished and he realized that his emotions had just been 'trying it on' like a young child having a tantrum, and then suddenly decided to give up!

He gets invited to attend a conference in Finland, where he meets Brad Absetz. (covered more in subsequent chapters)

Wilson explains his belief in the philosopher Husserl's idea that we perceive the world through actively mentally 'grasping' or probing things with our attention. However, because we are doing this all the time it becomes unconscious – like breathing – and we assume therefore that perception is just something that happens automatically. However, if we put more effort into perceiving things – paying more attention –

we can stimulate our perception and the world can feel more real and alive. This is what, in Wilson's opinion, is actually happening at those moments when we feel more alive, like the first day of a holiday, or Christmas morning. In other words: you only get out what you put in.

Wilson then describes a way to achieve control over your attention in order to produce this feeling of aliveness – what he calls 'the peak experience' – at will:

'Take a pen or pencil and hold it up against a blank wall or ceiling. Now concentrate on the pen as if it is the most important thing in the world. Then allow your senses to relax, so you see the pen against the background of the wall. Concentrate again. Relax again. Keep on doing this until you become aware of the ability to focus the attention at will. You will find that this unaccustomed activity of the will is tiring; it produces a sense of strain behind the eyes. My own experience is that if you persist, in spite of the strain, the result is acute discomfort, followed by a sudden immense relief – the 'peak experience'…we become aware that we can alter our perceptions with an act of will. They are not something that 'happen to us'.' (P. 37)

Wilson also describes another technique for achieving the same result:

'I was reminded of another exercise for the focusing of perception: Wilhelm Reich's breathing exercise. Reich made his patients lie on the floor, and take a deep breath; then they had to exhale slowly, allowing the out-going relaxation to move from the lungs, to the stomach, then down to the genitals. They had to repeat, as they did this: 'Out, down, through'.'

Wilson then describes getting the attendees at the conference to practice the breathing exercise, followed by the pen exercise. To his surprise it induces feelings of exaltation,

floating, and timelessness.

Wilson spends some time reading short poems that Brad had written, which he is immensely impressed by.

Ch 3: How to contact the ‘Other Self’

This chapter begins with the life story of Brad. He and his wife suffered a great tragedy (the death of their young adopted son) that plunged his wife into a deep depression. Whilst she would lie on the bed for hours, unable to speak or move, he would lay next to her, relaxed yet alert in case she needed him. It was in this state that he began to feel a strange impulse to move one of his arms.

It was this form of non-mechanical, relaxed vigilance that Brad had learned during the periods of laying with his wife. Through developing this discipline, Wilson believes that Brad unlocked the ability to let his right brain express itself directly through these movements of his arm. Eventually Brad learned to let these impulses make full, complex movements of his arm and hand. For example, at the dinner table he could let these impulses control his choice of foods, which he believed were healthier than those he’d usually pick! He also produced a wide range of beautiful, psychedelic-like drawings by letting these unconscious impulses control his arm and hand. On one occasion, when feeling ill, he allowed his unconscious impulses to take over and they took him into the kitchen, boiled some water, carefully selected particular cups and saucers and arranged them on a tray, then took him into his living room, sat him cross-legged on the floor and began something akin to a slow, deliberately structured Japanese tea ceremony!

Brad also observed that animals make a lot of spontaneous movements like these, but Humans rarely do. The only exception being when we do things like yawn and stretch – the spontaneous shaking and stretching movements of our arms and

bodies then leading to relaxation!

Wilson says that our robotic brains – accustomed to constantly worrying and anticipating things that need to be done – don't know how to relax. Even in moments were we have nothing to do (e.g. waiting at an airport or in a queue) rather than relax, this ceaseless worrying energy tends to build-up and we feel a sort of growing tension and discomfort. However, if you have to maintain conscious alertness for a period of time, it stops the robot taking over and leaves you feeling energized, and finally, when you let go of the alertness, deeply relaxed.

Quotes:

"Human beings are 99 per cent 'robot'. Our bodies are programmed to breathe, to sleep, to digest, to excrete; our instincts are programmed to reproduce our kind and protect our children. But our minds are also mechanical…I am typing this page without effort, because after thirty-odd years, typing has become 'automatic'. We live automatically. The simplest way of ceasing to live 'mechanically' is to make a continual attempt at 'vigilence', self-awareness." (P.46)

"When very tired, the best way to unwind is not to lie down and try to relax; it is to get absorbed in something else. Five minutes' total absorption – let us say, in some fascinating news item on television – recharge our vital batteries more than hours of trying to relax." (P. 51)

Ch 4: the road to visionary experience

Wilson describes a book by Jurij Moskvitin called 'Essay on the origin of thought'. In it, Moskvitin argues that much of our perception is just projecting expectations and meanings out onto the world around us rather than directly perceiving it.

Again, he mentions the view of the philosopher Edmund Husserl that perception is intentional. We have to actively grasp at things to properly perceive them. If I am looking at something with my eyes, but my mind is day-dreaming, I don't really see it. Even if we look at things with our full attention, if we are not grasping at the different levels of meaning of what we see, we are not fully perceiving it. For example, with certain types of music you may first need to learn to appreciate them before you can really perceive them properly, if not you just hear discordant noise.

What we perceive, and take to be the 'real world', is actually something akin to an instantaneous painting that our brains make. Its 'inspired' by the real world, but its just as much full of our own beliefs and knowledge. The real world is out there, but we don't see it directly, and it's probably way more complex and larger than we can know.

There are three ways to transform our daily consciousness to something like the 'peak experience':

(1) We can 'manipulate' our senses through drugs, alcohol or buying ourselves new material things. However, these leave us still feeling weak and reliant on outside forces to change our consciousness.

(2) The second method is to increase your knowledge. Learning new things – in theory – can deepen your perception of the world around you.

(3) Thirdly, to master your inner, creative self, and understand that it's this that creates your perception of the world around you.

Ch 5: from negative to positive freedom

This chapter tells more of Brad's life story. The point Wilson makes is that – like many people – Brad's life was driven by the external need for

material security and respectability. However, if you are seeking mental freedom it's not enough to simply reject the demands of respectable society, you need to be 'for' something and not just 'against' something (the 'positive' and 'negative' freedoms referred to in the title of this chapter).

Quote:

'Nothing is plainer, more simple, more direct than the impulse to freedom. And nothing is simpler than taking the first step, which consists of rejection: of conventional ties, of the bourgeoisie, of the establishment. But this only produces negative freedom, of the kind Fichte meant when he said 'to be free is nothing.To become free is everything.' Most rebellions end here. The rebel knows clearly what he doesn't want; but he is less sure about what he wants.' (P.94)

Ch 6: A Century of Misunderstanding

The writings of the European romantics seemed to be expressing the 'feeling of excitement, of happiness and affirmation..that…reality is infinitely deeper and richer than it appears to ordinary perception: that everyday consciousness is a liar' (P.98)

We become discouraged and lethargic too easily. It's the over-operation of a necessary facility: protecting us from wasting too much energy; but ends up causing us to waste too much! We think we are reacting rationally to outside obstacles, but we're actually allowing our emotions to discourage us, this creates a negative feedback whereby we become less engaged, thus bored and more discouraged.

When we assume its outside circumstances that create heightened perception, we can be left with a feeling of anti-climax.

When the psychologist Abraham Maslow began talking to his students about 'peak experiences', they started having more of

them. Merely thinking about it was putting more intentionality into their perceptions and creating more ‘peak experiences’ for them.

Quotes:

‘Proust came closer than any of the romantics to gripping the problem of ‘vision’ in the forceps of analysis. He recognized the essentially paradoxical nature of experience: how we can be feeling bored and listless one moment, and then quite suddenly experience a momentary immortality, a sense of power, of insight, of vision. What is more, we are not swept into these moments on the crest of a wave of ecstasy or vitality; they are only a hair’s breadth away from the experience of fatigue and boredom. (P.98)

‘We must grasp this central fact: that most of our problems are self-inflicted, caused by ‘negative feedback’. We allow some dreary prospect to cause a sinking feeling, then accept the sinking feeling as evidence that life is difficult and dangerous – ‘we can’t win’. Our descendants will look back with astonishment on our naivety. They will have learned the crucial lesson: that external events may or may not be controllable; we choose our reaction to them.’ (P.114)

Ch 7: Access to inner worlds

Our minds are an Aladin’s cave of vivid memories and ‘inner worlds’ of imaginative information. We could really bring alive the theoretical information we carry around in our left brains if we breathed life into it from the imagination of our right brains.

Sir Karl Popper described three worlds: world 1 is the physical world, world 2 is that of our thoughts, and world 3 is that of all the information and culture that human’s have accumulated through history.

Quotes:

“Will is the way to nirvana; laziness is the way of death. The wise man guards his vigour as his greatest possession.” (P.119)

‘Since we are full of automatic tensions, the direct approach – simply to ‘unwind’ – is seldom successful. It is better to begin by deliberately increasing the tension. Concentrate the mind, as if by lifting an enormously heavy weight, and allow the attention to move from part to part of the body enlisting the cooperation of each part in the collective effort. Clench and unclench the fists; tense and relax the muscles of the arms, the stomach the thighs. After half a minute or so, relax. Then do it again.’ (P.119-120)

‘This effort also makes one aware that we are normally full of unused energy.’ (P.120)

‘Like the earth of a hundred years ago, our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins. Like the giraffe and the duck-billed platypus, the creatures inhabiting these remoter regions of the mind are exceedingly improbable.’ Aldous Huxley

‘Intelligence sprang from a sense of urgency. And now the urgency has diminished, and man can afford to relax and enjoy this magnificent civilization he has created, he finds it impossible to escape the old sense of urgency.’ (P.129)

“Ants labour impersonally at their ant-hills; wasps labour impersonally at their nests: these are their homes. Man labours impersonally at this gigantic edifice that is World 3: that is his home.” (P. 128)

“Most of us waste about 90 percent of our lives in pure automatic living. In order to suspend this, I merely have to behave as if I am listening intently for some important noise, like the ringing of a telephone. And as I remain in this condition of ‘openness’, my vital powers begin to rise in me, like water in a well.” (P.137)