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David Foster Wallace as American Hedgehog

By Daniel R. Kelly

“The fox knows many things; the hedgehog knows one big thing” - Archilochus, 8th century BC

So was David Foster Wallace a fox or a hedgehog? There isn't an obvious answer to the question. Clearly he knew a great many things, ranging from postmodern literary theory to the history and development of the mathematical concept of infinity, and from the paradoxical effectiveness of the simple clichés of Alcoholics Anonymous to the arcana of the U.S. tax code. On the other hand, despite the sometimes overwhelming breadth of what he knew about, the more familiar one becomes with Wallace's body of work the more difficult it is to escape the feeling that there is something distinctively hedgehog-ish about it. But if he was a hedgehog, what was the one big thing that he knew?

This isn't an easy question to answer either, but there are a number of recognizable and interrelated themes that recur throughout his body of work. These themes—language and meaning; choice and the will; the self, selfishness, solipsism, and their prospects for being overcome—all emanate from a core concern with, roughly, what it means “to be a real human being” (McCaffery 1993). This concern and many of the themes he used to explore it were present right from the beginning, manifest in different ways in each of his two undergraduate senior theses (Wallace 1987, 2010; see also Ryerson 2010). Some of the contradictory impulses found in his corpus were there from the beginning as well. His life's work bespeaks a faith in the importance and power of language. By his own reckoning he thought it could be used to apply “CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow” (McCaffery 1993). He was on the Usage Panel for the fourth edition of

the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a self-described SNOOT¹ whose attention to the details of proper grammar and vocabulary was beyond meticulous, someone so preternaturally adept and inventive with words that a contemporary measured the effect of his death by stating that “the language is impoverished” (Sullivan 2011). Wallace ended up devoting his life to writing, using language to map out and make vivid the current state of the human condition, but he also harbored doubts about his instrument, or at least deep suspicions about some of its common uses. Doubts of this sort inform one of the core concerns of his undergraduate thesis in philosophy. The method of “Richard Taylor’s ‘Fatalism’ and the Semantics of Physical Modality” is to delve into the logical structure of a family of highly nuanced locutions about time and possibility, ultimately to show that Taylor’s substantive fatalist conclusion does not follow from his merely linguistic premises: “if Taylor and the fatalists want to force upon us a metaphysical conclusion, they must do metaphysics, *not* semantics. And this seems entirely appropriate” (Wallace 2010, 213).

The larger motivation for that paper, however, centers not so much on language but on another of the themes that would dominate Wallace’s career. The aim of the thesis is to rebut Taylor’s conclusion and so to undermine its apparent foreclosure on the very possibility of free will. Wallace’s own conclusion is modest and purely negative; he wants only to refute an argument that attempts to show choice is impossible. He does not mount a positive case that free will is, indeed, possible (let alone actual), nor does he attempt to capture the essence of genuine choice, or to say how an individual might fail or succeed to express her free will, or how in succeeding she might choose well or poorly. But he never abandons those topics. While Wallace eventually opted for the tools of the writer of novels, short stories, literary journalism, and narrative nonfiction rather than those of the logician and analytic philosopher, he continued to use language to explore the themes of choice and free will from a remarkable number of angles over the course of his lifetime.² Those who feel drawn to the view that there is something distinctively hedgehog-ish about Wallace

¹ A term, taken from his childhood, that Wallace uses throughout his essay “Authority and American Usage” to denote “a really extreme usage fanatic” and which was an acronym for either “Sprachgefühl Necessitate Our Ongoing Tendence” or “Syntax Nudniks of Our Time”. (Wallace 2005, 69 fn 5).

² As we will see, over the course of his career Wallace became less interested in the more metaphysical facets of choice and the traditional dialectic between free will and fatalism, and was instead drawn toward the more ethical, epistemic, and existential facets, which, perhaps not coincidentally, are also those that bear more directly on the quality of our daily lives. With that in mind, it may be the case that much of what Wallace talks about under the monikers of free will and choice will not interest certain analytic philosophers who understand and use the term “free will” in particular, technical ways.

might also be tempted to think that the “one big thing” he knew had something to do with the challenges and pitfalls of choosing, and the ways in which problems connected to choice presented themselves to those of us living in the turn-of-the-millennium United States. Since I am both so drawn and so tempted, this is the case I will make in this essay. Much of it will be devoted to identifying, fleshing out, and presenting in a linear manner what I see as one of, if not the, major lines of thought about choice and free will that weaves its way through the Wallace oeuvre and the main images and metaphors he used to express it.

Giving Yourself Away

In their recent book *All Things Shining*, the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly begin with the idea that our culture is currently in the grip of a predicament that is not merely moral but deeply existential, and perhaps distinctive of our moment in history: “in the contemporary world we face a deeper and more difficult problem. It is not just that we know the course of right action and fail to pursue it; we often seem not to have any sense for what the standards of living a good life are in the first place. Or said another way, we seem to have no ground for choosing one course of action over any other” (2011, 15).

As they continue to articulate and explore this predicament, they use the details of Wallace’s work, life, and death as way to bring out what they call “the burden of choice.” In its most general form,

The burden of choice, as we have called it . . . amounts to profound questions: how, given the kinds of being that we are, is it possible to live a *meaningful* life? Or more particularly, where are we to find the significant differences among the possible actions in our lives? For it is these differences that provide a basis for making decisions about who we are to be or become. . . . All of these questions ultimately seem to lead them back to the basic one: On what basis should I make this choice?

(2011, 12)

Dreyfus and Kelly use Wallace to motivate their discussion because they see him as being especially sensitive to the toll the burden of choice can take, and believe that he had a gift for revealing the ways in which it imposes itself on contemporary individuals and the measures people might take in dealing with it—or trying to avoid it. They are impressed with the fact that he wrestled with the problem on a personal level as well. For them, Wallace was “the proverbial canary in the coal mine of modern existence” (2011, 26).³

Wallace does tackle this very problem, and in doing so he uses a number of approaches to recast it in fresh and illuminating ways. One phrase that turns up in a number of different places is the “need to give yourself away,” which Wallace uses to talk about an inner drive that he seems confident most of his readers will recognize in one form or another. For instance, Hal Incandenza, one of the protagonists of *Infinite Jest* and an adolescent prodigy who has spent most of his life at a top tennis academy, notes that “experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels” (Wallace 1996, 53). He later reflects on the insight, but with much more ambivalence:

It now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of black miracle to me that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end. Could dedicate their entire lives to it. It seemed admirable and at the same time pathetic. We are dying to give ourselves away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar,

³ Dreyfus and Kelly also see in Wallace’s work a final, specific *recommendation* about the best way to handle the burden of choice: “The sole possibility for meaning, according to Wallace, is found in the strength of the individual’s will” (2011, 45), and “the sacred in Wallace—insofar as he can see such a phenomenon at all—is something that *we impose* upon experience; there is nothing *given* about it at all. For Wallace anything—even some type of ‘consumer-hell’—can be experienced as sacred if I choose to make it so” (2011, 47).

This is not the place to engage in a full and proper debate about this, so I will briefly state my main objection. In short, I disagree that Dreyfus and Kelly identify a unique or even definitive statement of Wallace’s prescriptive ideas on the matter; certainly, he explores many, and adopts different views in different places, often for different rhetorical purposes. Dreyfus and Kelly tend to focus on his later writing, particularly the Kenyon commencement address (Wallace 2009) and *The Pale King* (Wallace 2011). The view found there, however, is difficult to square with the fact that he also writes often and with apparent approval about *surrendering* the will to something larger than one’s self.

topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. Something pathetic about it. A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from what, exactly? . . . To what purpose? This was why they started us so young [at the tennis academy]: to give ourselves away before the age when the questions *why* and *to what* grow real beaks and claws. It was kind, in a way.

(900)

Wallace himself uses the same expression while talking to David Lipsky about his motivation in writing *Infinite Jest*: “The book isn’t supposed to be about *drugs*, getting off drugs. Except as the fact that drugs are kind of a metaphor for the sort of addictive continuum that I think has to do with how we as a culture relate to things that are alive. . . . So I think it’s got something to do with, that we’re just—we’re absolutely dying to give ourselves away to something” (Lipsky 2008, 81). Wallace goes on:

I wanted to do something that was very, very much about America. And the things that ended up for me being most distinctively *American* right now, around the millennium, had to do with both entertainment and about some kind of weird, addictive um . . . wanting to give yourself away to something. That I ended up thinking was kind of a distorted religious impulse. And a lot of the AA stuff in the book was mostly an excuse, was to try to have—it’s very hard to talk about people’s relationship with any kind of God, in any book later than like Dostoyevsky. I mean the culture, it’s all wrong for it.

(Lipsky 2008, 82)⁴

⁴ It is not clear from the context why Wallace thinks the impulse that American culture distorts is “religious.” A plausible interpretation, suggested by Dreyfus and Kelly, is that in earlier eras there would be no question, no choice or range of options about where to direct the impulse—it would have been handled by religion: “Although the burden of choice can seem inevitable, in fact it is unique to contemporary life. It is not just that in earlier epochs one knew on what basis one’s most fundamental existential choices were made: it is that the existential questions didn’t even make sense. Consider the Middle Ages, for example. During this period in the Christian West a person’s identity was determined by God. . . . it was virtually inconceivable that one’s identity might be determined in any other way” (2011, 13).

Needless to say, our way of life has changed dramatically. Once, the story goes, societies were organized around a single dominant normative framework, and so offered only a single kind of path or tightly

There are two ideas in these passages that I want to flesh out. The first has to do with the anatomy of the picture Wallace briefly sketches; the second with the hazards of choice presented by turn-of-the-millennium America.

Choosing a Temple

Much of what Wallace says about choice and the need to give yourself away can be fit into a schema made of three distinct, general components: (1) the primal *need* or basic *impulse* to give away or invest, (2) a sort of *resource* that is “given away” or type of *currency* that a person is driven to invest, and (3) the objects at which the impulse might be directed, the *vessels* with which the resource might be filled, into which the currency might be channeled. Choice and its many burdens enter the picture at the third step, when a person must decide between a range of options about where to direct his impulse, what to invest in. The specifics of individual manifestations and particular cases obviously differ, but this general schema of components can be used to reveal some telling commonalities in how Wallace often dramatizes the problem and addresses his questions and concerns about choice. Among these concerns is a desire to better grasp the interplay between the first two components and the third component, to scrutinize, understand, and peek behind the strange blind spot that the narrator of *Infinite Jest* describes in Hal and his contemporaries: “Like most North Americans of his generation, Hal tends to know way less about why he feels certain ways about the objects and pursuits he’s devoted to than he does about the objects and pursuits themselves” (Wallace 1996, 54).

In identifying the first component as a “need” and an “impulse,” Wallace seems to

limited class of vessels, dictated by religious culture so much taken for granted that it was effectively invisible. In today’s secular age, however, our culture presents a wide range of options for where to direct the impulse, how to organize our concern, construct our identity, and invest our selves (also see Taylor 1989, 2007). Moreover, our culture’s options do not even seem to be fixed, but are obviously malleable, evolving at a faster and arguably accelerating pace. Hence, perhaps, the epigraph to *The Pale King*: “We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed.” —Frank Bidart.”

conceive of this part of the phenomena as originating inside the individual, “real human beings” that are driven by it. The impulse is simply there—a deep, inner, human given—and it demands to be satisfied, to be directed somewhere or other. Wallace also appears to see the second component of this picture as a human given, but of the three it is the most difficult to pin down. Wallace talks about the “self” that is given away in the above passages, but the term seems to function as an extremely general catch-all, and an unfortunately ambiguous one. For instance, in “Laughing with Kafka,” Wallace (1998) appears to endorse the idea that a self is not, like the impulse or the resource, a given but rather something that each individual human must, over the course of a lifetime, painstakingly *construct*. He bemoans the fact that his undergraduates don’t get this, and so don’t get Kafka. Rather, they have been misled by American culture to think “that a self is something you just have.” Much of Kafka’s humor and appeal remains opaque to them because it lies in his depiction of “the horrific struggle to establish a human self.”

Elsewhere Wallace gets more specific. In reflecting on Dostoevsky and religion, Wallace frames the resource and the impulse to invest it in terms of *faith*: “is somehow *needing* to have faith a sufficient reason for having faith? But then what kind of need are we talking about?” (2005, 260). Further along in the same essay he talks about this kind of spendable currency in terms of “passion, conviction, and engagement” (271). In his later work, especially *The Pale King* and the Kenyon address, he discusses the microeconomics of the resource in terms of simple *attention*, to “how and what you think . . . what you pay attention to” (2009). At a more macro level, the resource might be understood as a person’s time, what she does with the finite span of her lifetime. At a more abstract level, the currency might be thought of as the kind of significance that, when it is bestowed upon something, gives it personal *meaning*. Using a turn of phrase whose religious connotations he obviously welcomes, Wallace tells his Kenyon audience that what an individual chooses most to invest with meaning and significance, what she devotes her attention and life to, she *worships*.

The term “worship” is used repeatedly and in a similar way throughout a long conversation that takes place in *Infinite Jest* between the Canadian secret operative Remy Marathe and his fellow operative Hugh Steeply. Continuing with the religious imagery, Marathe also uses the term “temple” for the third component of the tripartite schema that I’m using, that is, for whatever it is that is worshipped, whatever vessel a person lavishes attention on, invests passion and sentiment in, devotes her life to: “Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith” (Wallace 1996, 107). Nowadays, different people worship at different temples, devote their lives to different things, of course: drugs, sport, religion, academic excellence, family life, sexual conquest, political causes, various forms of professional achievement, and the hedonistic pursuit of brute pleasure. In his fiction, Wallace imagines what it is like to have made different choices, to worship at one of these temples or another, what the benefits and drawbacks of each might be.⁵ But, bringing us back to the issue of free will and the burden

⁵ Though I’m not convinced he ever makes a grand or final pronouncement on which “temple” is the best or right one, Wallace certainly doesn’t remain completely neutral or reserve all judgment. He maps out the physical and psychological hell that drugs lead to in *Infinite Jest*. He seems of two minds on the issue of devotion to sport, the “temple” that is the focus of the other half of *Infinite Jest*. Elsewhere, he emphasizes some of the positives in “Federer as Religious Experience” (Wallace 2006) while highlighting some of the negatives in “How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart” (in Wallace 2005, 141–155). But I think he is most eloquent about the tradeoffs in “Tennis Player Michael Joyce’s Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness.” About athletes in general, he says:

“Bismarck’s epigram about diplomacy and sausages applies also to the way we Americans seem to feel about professional athletes. . . . But we prefer not to countenance the kinds of sacrifices the professional-grade athlete has made to get so good at one particular thing. . . . But the actual facts of the sacrifices repel us when we see them: basketball geniuses who cannot read, sprinters who dope themselves, defensive tackles who shoot up bovine hormones until they collapse or explode. We prefer not to consider the shockingly vapid and primitive comments uttered by athletes in postcontest interviews, or to imagine what impoverishments in one’s mental life would allow people actually to think in the simplistic way great athletes seem to think . . . the realities of top-level athletics today require an early and total commitment to one pursuit. An almost ascetic focus. A subsumption of almost all other features of human life to their one chosen talent and pursuit. A consent to live in a world that, like a child’s world, is very serious and very small” (Wallace 1997, 236–237).

About Michael Joyce himself, Wallace has this to say:

“The restrictions on his life have been, in my opinion, grotesque; and in certain ways Joyce himself is grotesque. But the radical compression of his attention and self has allowed him to become a transcendent practitioner of an art—something few of us get to be. It’s allowed him to visit and test parts of his psyche that most of us do not even know for sure we have, to manifest in concrete form virtues like courage, persistence in the face of pain or exhaustion, performance under wilting scrutiny and pressure. . . . He is an American and he wants to win. He wants this, and he will pay to have it—will pay just to pursue it, let it define him—and will pay with the regretless cheer of a man for whom issues of choice became irrelevant long ago” (Wallace 1997, 254–255).

In the Kenyon address, he preaches being alert to the opportunities for choice, rather than advocating sport or any other particular temple, though he does warn that “the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the

of choice, a major part of Wallace's message is that deciding where to direct the resource is as fundamental as decisions get, and that confronting this choice is, for us turn-of-the-millennium Americans, unavoidable. As Marathe puts it, "For this choice determines all else. No? All other of our you say *free* choices follow from this: what is our temple?" (107). Each individual must choose where to aim her own impulse, choose how to invest the currency of her attention and passion, choose how to spend her time and establish her identity, choose what to do with her life. Wallace makes essentially this point in the Kenyon address, where he also expresses it in religious terms, even though the context and emphasis is somewhat different: "Because here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship" (Wallace 2009).

Total Noise, Congenital Skepticism, and the Cage

Understood using the more expansive sense of "worship," this last statement threatens to become trivial, but this brings me to the second idea that I want to flesh out, this one about the texture of our moment in history. Wallace was convinced that contemporary America does not do a particularly good job dealing with this impulse and the choices it forces upon us. Much of his work can be understood as exploring *why* and *how* it's so difficult for us to choose well or to even appreciate this whole cluster of issues, and as charting out the ways American culture fails to equip its people to handle those issues, talk about them with one another, or even think clearly about them on their own. He identifies many difficulties, but

Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive" (Wallace 2009).

Overall, though, Wallace seems to have been most tempted by a view similar to that awkwardly expressed in *Infinite Jest* by Gerhard Schtitt, to the effect that it is best to be devoted to anything as long as it is larger than your self, understood here as your own immediate desires, appetites, and pleasures. According to Schtitt, to be devoted to nothing but the self is to be ultimately unhappy on some deep level, alone, and lost: "Without there is something bigger. Nothing to contain and give the meaning. Lonely. *Verstiegenheit*.* . . Any something. The *what*: this is more unimportant than that there is *something*" (Wallace 1996, 83). *“(Low-Bavarian for something like ‘wandering alone in blasted disorienting territory beyond all charted limits and orienting markers,’ supposedly” (Wallace 1996, 994).

I'll note three that I think are the most interesting.

The first factor that makes decision difficult in contemporary America, according to Wallace, is that the number of options and amount of information we have to deal with is overwhelming, and competition for our very attention is enormous. He tells Lipsky (2010, 17) that “Life seems to strobe on and off for me, to barrage me with input,” and he puts a slightly different spin on the point in an interview with Laura Miller (1996): “The world that I live in consists of 250 advertisements a day and any number of unbelievably entertaining options, most of which are subsidized by corporations that want to sell me things.” This description touches on the calculated seductiveness of advertising (“pay attention to me! buy this!”), but the difficulty I want to bring out is largely epistemic. The flux of contemporary America is endlessly distracting and puts us in a near constant state of information overload. Wallace uses a discussion of the complexities involved in sorting through and choosing something as seemingly simple—or at least as well circumscribed—as the best American essays of 2007 as a jumping-off point for some much larger-scale reflections about the

Total Noise that’s also the sound of our U.S. culture right now, a culture and volume of info and spin and rhetoric and context that I know I’m not alone in finding too much to even absorb, much less to try to make sense of or organize into any kind of triage of saliency or value. Such basic absorption, organization, and triage used to be what was required of an educated adult, a.k.a. an informed citizen—at least that’s what I got taught. Suffice it here to say that the requirements now seem different.

(Wallace 2007, 1–2)

No single mind can encompass the culture, and no individual can consider, let alone absorb and properly evaluate, every claim, position, option, or demand. To get a handle on or even make sense of the flood of information, we are forced to select and rely more and more on what Wallace dubs “Deciders,” evaluative filters that we trust to assess, filter, and

winnow what is worthy of our full attention.⁶ He suggests that we are just beginning to awaken to how this is transforming our abilities to make any decision, only now

starting to become more aware of just how much subcontracting and outsourcing and submitting to other Deciders we're all now forced to do, which is threatening (the inchoate awareness is) to our sense of ourselves as intelligent free agents. And yet there is no clear alternative to this outsourcing and submission. It may possibly be that acuity and taste in choosing which Deciders one submits to is now the real measure of informed adulthood.

(Wallace 2007, 3)

On this score Wallace gives an expression and diagnosis of his own discomfort with the evolving situation and the resulting fact that we are now forced to choose our own collection of trusted evaluative filters, to essentially decide on a set of Deciders. He did not seem to have any advice on what to do about it, though.

A second aspect of contemporary American culture that Wallace thought aggravates our ability to appreciate and deal with the burden of choice is a certain anathema to unguarded conviction, to simple devotion itself.⁷ This puts us in an intolerable dilemma: on the one hand, simply in virtue of being alive and human we are saddled with a kind of existential currency and an irresistible impulse to invest it in something. On the other hand, as educated, well-off, turn-of-the-millennium Americans we find ourselves instilled with a deep suspicion of both. Wallace throws this feature of our culture into relief by holding up Dostoevsky, whom he deeply admires for appearing “to possess degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we—here, today—cannot or do not

⁶ See Pariser (2011) for an accessible and thought provoking investigation of this phenomena and the “filter bubble” it creates around us.

⁷ Of course there is no single uniform “American culture”. Moreover, segments of the contemporary United States welcome and even encourage the kind of straightforward, passionate dedication being discussed here. I take Wallace to be speaking for and to only a segment of the population, namely, well, that segment of the population that would be reading something written by David Foster Wallace.

permit ourselves” (271). Wallace continues to flesh out his characterization of this aspect of our culture: “there are certain tendencies we believe are bad, qualities we hate and fear. Among them are sentimentality, naïveté, archaism, fanaticism. It would probably be better to call our own art’s culture now one of congenital skepticism. Our intelligentsia distrust strong belief, open conviction. Material passion is one thing, but ideological passion disgusts us on some deep level” (Wallace 2005, 272).

Connecting this to the “distorted religious impulse” mentioned earlier, the suggestion here seems to be that this American anathema toward sentiment and conviction is part of what “distorts” the impulse to invest or even express it too deeply. This skepticism has the effect of smothering that core human urge, making it hard for a person to be consciously, proudly, passionately, and unironically devoted to anything—or anything other than perhaps the pursuit of material ends and a life that involves “as little pain and as much pleasure as possible” (Wallace 2005, 261). But for all that, the skepticism and the reticence that comes with it don’t make the impulse shut down or disappear. Instead we are left without any outlet, frustrated and stifled until we end up “dying to give ourselves away to something.”

In his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace traces out in great detail how this congenital skepticism is related to irony and ironic distancing, and how both have come to dominate television, and in turn himself and his generation of American fiction writers. While charting out another manifestation of this aspect of the distinctively American difficulties with choice and devotion, he offers a bit of guidance, at least to the next generation of artists: “The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might . . . have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. . . . To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama” (1997, 81).

It is not immediately clear what advice to extract from this for someone struggling with the burden of choice and the best way to create a meaningful life, rather than an artist

struggling to create meaningful art. Perhaps, connecting it to the claim that the impulse cannot simply be shut down, making the decision of where to direct it unavoidable, the suggestion in this quote can be interpreted as urging us to better appreciate the abstract and difficult-to-grasp contours of the intolerable dilemma in which our American moment places us. In effect, it is a call for the kind of clarity that is better achieved through sincerity and direct honesty rather than mockery or coded irony. Since, as he puts it elsewhere, “everybody worships,” getting clearer about this fact might also help us get more comfortable with it, and so be less disposed to the kind of knee-jerk suspicion toward passionate engagement or deep conviction that Wallace sees as distinctive of our current, congenitally skeptical outlook.

Indeed, this brings us to a third source of difficulty, one that can be found in passages where Wallace suggests there is something about contemporary America that corrodes its people’s capacity for choice itself. Wallace often expresses this strand of thought in terms of hedonism and addiction. For instance, he takes up the familiar idea that American culture is adolescent, but pushes it further, claiming we live in a culture that is not just adolescent, but hedonistic and selfish. He goes on to note that in its most extreme, undiluted form, the package of adolescence, hedonism, and selfishness can easily lead to addiction. Wallace makes the point about adolescence in a footnote (and a footnote to that footnote) in “Laughing with Kafka” where he says

a crude but concise way to put the whole thing is that our present culture is, both developmentally and historically, “adolescent.” . . . The single most stressful and frightening period of human development—the stage when the adulthood we claim to crave begins to present itself as a real and narrowing system of responsibilities and limitations.

A common response of adolescents to this stress and fright is to indulge their most hardcore hedonistic tendencies and “do their most serious falling-down drinking and drugging and

reckless driving and rampant fucking and mindless general Dionysian-type reveling” (Wallace 1998, n2, 2a).

As noted above, Wallace develops the connection to addiction explicitly in his conversation with David Lipsky (2010), and it is one of the major themes of *Infinite Jest*. Some of the book’s most memorable images depict the effect that complete addiction can have on an addict’s will, distorted impulse, and capacity for choice, and they are peppered throughout the novel. One of the most recurrent image is that of *the cage*. The metaphor is used to illustrate how an addictive Substance, say a drug that initially seems to offer an instant kind of freedom—an escape from the self and the burden of choice—slowly and insidiously creates a need so dire and encompassing that it swamps out everything else, all other choices, leaving the addict trapped in a choice-nullifying prison that seems inescapable. Another family of images, usually offered by and to recovering addicts, tends to be insectoid: “the chilling Hispanic term for whatever interior disorder drives the addict back again and again to the enslaving Substance is *tecató gusano*, which apparently connotes some kind of interior psychic worm that cannot be sated or killed” (Wallace 1996, 200). And also:

Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still. The will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago. It’s now shot through with the spidered fibrosis of your Disease. His own experience’s term for the Disease is: *The Spider*. You have to Starve The Spider: you have to surrender your will.

(357)

Something about American culture, the suggestion seems to be, encourages this kind of flight from the pressures of choice. But of course choice is inescapable, and the easy, seductive, hedonistic alternatives, as tempting as they might initially seem, lead to an even less bearable situation: a gradual enslavement, where the eventual addict becomes ensnared

by a “temple” she initially, though unwisely and unreflectively, freely choose.

Complaints about shortcomings of this sort are made by many of the non-American characters throughout the novel. Marathe makes the case that Americans are unable to exercise control or critical judgment over “what we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith” (1996, 107), claiming that “someone sometime let you forget how to choose, and what. Someone let your people forget it was the only thing of importance, choosing” (Wallace 1996, 319). Wallace also portrays Gerhard Schtitt, the old-school German and director of the tennis academy, as slightly horrified by (the novel’s fictionalized version of) contemporary America, finding it “hilarious and frightening at the same time.” He sees the country as at least tacitly encouraging its citizens to mindlessly devote themselves to nothing more than a “sloppy intersection of desires and fears” and the “primacy of straight-line pursuing this flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness” (Wallace 1996, 82).

Schtitt is able to acknowledge that this is a recipe for happiness of a certain, shallow sort, but he is more impressed by its inevitable and toxic byproduct of loneliness: “The happy pleasure of the person alone, yes? . . . Lonely” (Wallace 1996, 82). Wallace sounds a similar note in his Kenyon address, when he warns graduating seniors that the contemporary American adult world they are about to enter “hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation” (2009). He also points out that this world does “not discourage you from operating on your default settings” of adolescent self-centeredness and that the Total Noise of contemporary America that invites us to remain in those default settings can seduce us into forgetting that organizing a life around this kind of lonely freedom and hedonistic pursuit of pleasure is even a choice at all, and not the one we have to make.

Wallace’s most fundamental piece of positive advice on this, I think, can be distilled down to two simple words: *wake up*. The reason his Kenyon address feels like a skeleton key

to his entire body of work is that it makes this point not obliquely or as the implicit moral of a story, but directly, with all of the “rhetorical niceties stripped away” (Wallace 2009). In under four thousands words, he sounds a clarion call to pay more and better attention to choosing—choosing where you direct your energy and core human impulse, choosing where to invest your passion, your conviction, your time, even choosing something as seemingly mundane as what to pay attention to on a day to day, hour by hour, minute by minute basis. More than that, though, he is at pains to drive home the point that these are, in fact, *choices*, they are opportunities to exercise free will, and they remain ubiquitous. Part of his message is that this is shockingly easy to miss or forget: “If your total freedom of choice regarding what to think about seems too obvious to waste time discussing, I’d ask you to think about fish and water, and to bracket for just a few minutes your skepticism about the value of the totally obvious” (Wallace 2009).⁸ If the problem is that contemporary American culture corrodes its people’s capacity for choice by distracting them, or by leaving them ill equipped to recognize opportunities to choose, or by actively discouraging individuals from “choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of [their] natural, hard-wired default setting” (Wallace 2009), then Wallace’s solution is, in effect, expressed throughout his body of work itself. Again and again, in story after story and article after article, he tries to wake his readers up, to make them see, make them more awake, alert, and aware of the contemporary American water, of how it affects those of us swimming through it, of the possibilities for choice and action that it affords us, but that we might have missed.

⁸ As Dreyfus and Kelly put the point, “Practices that a whole culture takes for granted are extremely difficult to identify” (2011, 17). Wallace begins his Kenyon address with a joke that illustrates exactly this point: “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’” The mention of “fish and water” from the quote in the main text is an allusion to this opening joke.

It's Called Free Will, Sherlock

David Foster Wallace was a champion of choice and a student of the problems associated with agency and free will throughout his entire life. For most of it, he did not address “the” problem of free will as it is typically presented in an introduction to philosophy course, or as it is framed in the philosophical literature on fatalism to which his undergraduate philosophy thesis was a contribution. But the case that I’ve been making here is that at the heart of Wallace’s work is a concern with choice that animates and informs nearly his entire corpus, from beginning to tragically early end. It was his big thing, the lens through which he viewed and made sense of the American world around him, the one subject by which he was most exercised and about which he had the most to say.

I’ll end by noting that there is another, perhaps equally visible, line of thought that runs throughout Wallace’s work and that centers on difficulties raised by self-consciousness about fraudulence and authenticity, performance and genuineness, and the seemingly inescapable double-binds that too much self-awareness can land one in. This strand is present but more peripheral in *Infinite Jest*; it is near the center of many of the stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, especially “Octet” (Wallace 2000, 111–136); in *The Pale King* it is most near the surface and presented with an interesting twist in the long conversation between Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion (Wallace 2011, 446–511); and it finds its best and fullest expression in what one commentator called Wallace’s “last great story” (Baskin 2009), “Good Old Neon” (Wallace 2004, 141–181). The reason I bring it up here is that it might seem to undermine my main thesis, namely that Wallace was a hedgehog and that the unifying theme of his work is a concern with choice.

For now, I can only point to where a response to this challenge might begin. On the one hand, it is not at all obvious that the “fraudulence paradox” is fundamentally about choice or free will. Neal, the main character of “Good Old Neon,” certainly doesn’t describe it in those terms:

The fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside—you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were.

(Wallace 2004, 147)

On the other hand, part of the greatness of this particular story is that Wallace doesn't rest content merely describing that paradox or its accompanying labyrinths of in-bent self-consciousness or simply illustrating the psychological havoc these kinds of double-binds can wreak on those caught in their grip (c.f. "The Depressed Person," Wallace 2000, 31–58). Rather, he goes on to offer words of reassurance, and even sneaks in some salutary advice about how to dissolve the problem and escape the double-bind. That intriguing, if murky, piece of advice explicitly connects these two major lines of thought in Wallace's work: "You think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock" (Wallace 2004, 179).

I do not, alas, have the space to map out the cluster of ideas, metaphors, and images Wallace uses to explore self-consciousness and the fraudulence paradox. A promising place to start would be with the observation that the issues surrounding authenticity and fraudulence are deeply related to questions about the nature of the self. As we have seen, on at least one way Wallace often thinks about the self, the process of constructing a self and the question of how to present it best in everyday life seem to be shot through with opportunities for choice, even if we don't always realize it. And such choices, like all choices, can be made well or poorly. In any event, I certainly think that the full project of exploring this theme in Wallace's thought is worthwhile. Of the many fruits that project might bear is a

better grasp of the interplay between that theme and the one I have examined here, as well as and a deeper understanding of what, for me, is one of the most perplexing but suggestive sentences in all of his work.⁹

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