The Existentialist Contradiction in David Foster Wallace: How Wallace’s Sociology Illuminates the Contradiction in Wallace’s Ethics

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1. Introduction

David Foster Wallace was a fiction writer who thought of himself as a fiction writer. So why write a piece on Wallace's sociology? Is there even such a thing, and why would it be interesting? This essay argues that Wallace’s nonfiction presents a sociology that constitutes the foundation of Wallace’s commitment to a literature of redemption. Critics have usually taken Wallace’s sociology for granted, moving on to evaluate his fiction on the basis of this presumption. Here, instead, we contrast Wallace’s sociology with the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Christopher Lasch to see whether it can withstand criticism. In doing so, we question Wallace’s entire intellectual project.

First, the analysis demonstrates that there is such a thing as Wallace’s sociology. Then, it contrasts Wallace’s sociology with the work of the above-mentioned authors. Finally, it indicates the fundamental contradiction that all the authors under analysis share. This contradiction afflicts all discourses that affirm compatibility between free will, defined as “the ability to determine oneself to choose otherwise,” and a traditional ethics of compassion.

This contradiction manifests the fundamental philosophical nature of Wallace’s work. Wallace’s analysis of contemporary society is elementally philosophical and so is his fiction of response. Wallace belongs among those writers who believe that literature reaches its highest pinnacles when it embodies the pulsating life-and-death importance of the problems of philosophy. His philosophical novels prove this. So does his essay...
“The Empty Plenum” and the ones on Kafka and Borges, and so does his list of favourite writers, which includes Socrates, Schopenhauer, Descartes, Kant, William James, Wittgenstein (Miller 62), St. Paul, Rousseau, Dostoevsky, and Camus (Jacob 157).

2. A Sociology by David Foster Wallace?

Auguste Comte founded sociology in his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42). Sociology was born to positivism as “the idea of a ‘science of man,’ devoted to uncovering scientific laws determining the basic dynamics of human interactions” (Blackburn 342). Over the years, though, the enclosure of positivism was questioned. Heidegger was among the first to show that the meaning of science cannot itself be scientific. In *What Is Called Thinking* (1951-2), he famously stated that “science does not think” (8), and in *Gesamtausgabe I.16* he explained why that is: “using physical methods, for example, I cannot say what physics is. What physics is, can only be thought following the manner of philosophical question” (Riha 80).

Heidegger did not criticize science. He only recognized that science is not beyond ideology. Like everything else, science depends on prior metaphysics—specifically empiricism, positivism, and Enlightenment values. To recognize only what can be scientifically verified is a value-choice that cannot itself be scientifically verified. Thus, science depends on philosophy. Horkheimer, Adorno, Schmidt, and many others agreed with Heidegger, and so the field went through an anti-positivistic turn, where every great sociologist established their own definition of the practice.

Durkheim was one of the original positivists. His definition of sociology’s goals in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) was: “to extend the scope of scientific rationalism to cover human behaviour” (33). But after him, sociology changed. Many appropriated Hegel’s critique of empiricism and Marx’s dialectics. Weber and Simmel pioneered *Verstehen*, the interpretative method. Today, the field is open, fluid, and interdisciplinary, and sociology is defined as “the study of social problems; the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society” (Stevenson 1370). This definition is as wide as can be. It accepts the largest variety of works under its label. And contemporary sociology is filled with references to philosophy, psychology, and even literature. For example, in *In Praise of Literature* (2016), Bauman and Mazzeo write that literature is crucial for sociology, and no claim could be more anti-positivistic than that.

As a result, Wallace’s nonfictional discourse unproblematically fits within today’s definition of sociology. After all, sociology literally means *lógos* of and about society, to reason and converse about society, and throughout his works Wallace does just that. He studies our social problems, their development and structure, what caused their advent, and how to overcome them.

For reasons of length, the present analysis can only *indicate* that sociology pervades Wallace’s nonfiction and generates all his fictional responses to today’s predicament (to *demonstrate* it would entail close readings of every single one of his writings). To do this, the analysis presents proof excerpted throughout Wallace’s oeuvre, offering the most significant passages that illuminate Wallace’s sociology and its contradiction.

Interpretations can move on three levels. First, they can report what a text objectively states. Second, they can extract from the text what it wanted but was unable to say.
Third, they can extract from the text what it should have said—given its premises—but was unable to say. Level two must build on level one and level three must build on both levels one and two. To show the contradiction inherent in someone’s thought is to engage in level three interpretation, which is what the present analysis attempts. Level-two and level-three interpretations must do violence to the text to achieve their ends, but this violence is necessary to illuminate the text’s own essence. This is the violence necessary to bring to light the unsaid in someone’s speech. This violence does not entail, in any sense, the devaluing of what is being interpreted. To argue that Wallace’s thought is trapped in a contradiction is not to negate the greatness of said thought.

3. The Foundation of Wallace’s Project

Wallace’s sociology defines the predicament against which he theorizes literature as therapeutic, redemptive, “an anodyne against loneliness” (Kennedy and Polk 16). It thus constitutes the foundation of his literary project. In confronting it, we question the axioms of Wallace’s thought. Too many studies of Wallace’s work have taken Wallace’s sociology as legitimate a priori. This has influenced too many evaluations of his fictional solutions to the human predicament. One must ask, therefore, whether Wallace’s sociology is correct—that is, whether his definition of the predicament is accurate—to assess whether the solutions he offers are viable. The present analysis reveals problems in Wallace’s social analysis, but this does not imply that the work of the other mentioned sociologists is superior to Wallace’s. On the contrary, this essay closes with the suggestion that a contradiction unites all sociologists under discussion, Wallace included. This contradiction originates in a flawed understanding of the implications of free will, and Wallace’s work reveals higher awareness of the dreadful consequences of our most fundamental beliefs.

4. Validations of Wallace’s Sociology

This essay is confrontational and therefore focuses on criticisms of Wallace’s sociology. It must nonetheless acknowledge that sociologists generally validate Wallace’s point of view. Many critics showed how Lasch’s The Culture of Narcissism (1979) impacted Wallace, and that this has not been the object of proper attention (despite Timmer’s Do You Feel It Too?). For example, Bauman’s Liquid Modernity (2000) begins with a quote from Paul Valéry’s The Outlook for Intelligence (1935) that condenses Wallace’s thoughts on our time and the raison d’être of The Pale King (2011): “Interruption, incoherence, surprise are the ordinary conditions of our life…. We can no longer bear anything that lasts. We no longer know how to make boredom bear fruit” (Valéry 130). Likewise, in The Art of Life (2008), Bauman quotes Gilles Lipovetsky’s L’ère du vide. Essais sur l’individualisme contemporain (1983): “Sacrificial culture is dead. We’ve stopped recognizing ourselves in any obligation to live for the sake of something other than ourselves” (Art of Life 41). Bauman uses these quotes to express his fundamental beliefs about the contemporary predicament, and anyone familiar with Wallace recognizes the core of his ethos in them. Contemporary sociology largely supports Wallace, and yet
focusing on the dissent leads us to the recognition of the contradiction that is fundamental in his thought.

5. Criticisms of Wallace’s Sociology

5.1 Pessimism

12 Ulrich and Elizabeth Beck would consider Wallace a pessimist. Their *Individualization* (2002) is a direct criticism of his sociology. According to their view, “the neoliberal idea of the free-market individual” (xxi) does not lead our society. Instead, “individualization”—i.e. “institutionalized individualism” (xxi)—does, and it overcomes the binary opposition between group identity and the autarkic self that characterized neoliberalism. In individualization, we concretely combine individual freedom with “an ethic of ‘altruistic individualism’” (xxii). We finally live in the ideal social structure.

13 Wallace disagrees. From “Fictional Futures” (1988) to “Deciderization 2007,” he criticizes neoliberal society for its individualism, utilitarianism, and cynicism, arguing that this social structure makes us self-centred, afraid, lonely, and sad. To this view, the Becks reply that “we are living in a highly moral world despite what the cultural pessimists try to tell us” (212); and that today “thinking of oneself and living for others, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal connection” (28).

14 But this connection of individuality and communion is exactly what Adam Smith’s original theory of capitalism established. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith argued that the pursuit of rational self-interest is both just and useful for the entire community. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), he defined morality as living-together in sympathy. This is the foundation of capitalism and neoliberalism (its evolution): these social configurations are not constructed upon a theory of pure egoism.

15 The predicaments we witness today result not from pure theoretical egoism but from the contradictions inherent in the hope that communion can be built upon individualism. Every day we witness how this contradiction resolves itself in the primacy of individualism and in the failure of communion. Like Wallace, the Becks reject neoliberalism. But unlike Wallace, they believe neoliberalism to be a thing of the past. Yet, their “individualization” adds nothing to the original capitalist framework and therefore cannot refute it. It can only renew its originary contradiction. The Becks recognize the suffering of neoliberal individualism, but their theory reiterates it.

16 Wallace’s condemnation of neoliberalism is explicit and consistent, and this makes his sociology more coherent than the Becks’. In *This Is Water*, Wallace states that “the so-called ‘real world’ of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self” (115). In other words, Wallace realizes that the contradiction of neoliberal ideology resolves itself in “the ‘rat race’” (123), in the postulation of the primacy of rational self-interest over social communion. The Becks would consider Wallace a pessimist, but Wallace is in truth a realist. He sees where neoliberalism necessarily leads. This is why he considers a complete shift of paradigm, looking for salvation in the “worship” (101) of something other than the self.
5.2 Narcissism

Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* defines today’s paradigmatic narcissist as a “psychological man”: “plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness, the ‘psychological man’ of the twentieth century seeks neither individual self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence but peace of mind” (13). This individual is “the final product of bourgeois individualism” (xvi).

Wallace fits this description perfectly. His is a quest for peace of mind, and his work speaks directly (but not only) to those plagued by anxiety and depression. The goal of Wallace’s call to self-sacrifice is ultimately self-centred: one must sacrifice oneself to save oneself: “not for them, but for us” (Lipsky 161). Yet, there is a further complication: there is a sense in which Wallace agrees with Lasch. For Wallace too the psychological man is a narcissist. He represents this throughout his fiction. For example, “The Depressed Person” is the paradigmatic instantiation ofLasch’s criticism of “post-Freudian therapies”: “the ability to manipulate...’life-support systems’ now appears to represent the highest form of wisdom” (Lasch 13, 49). Yet, Wallace contradicts himself in practice. He pursues worship of the other, but his final goal is selfish. The hope is to “truly to care about other people” (*This Is Water* 120), but the ethos begins and ends within the self. *This Is Water’s* fundamental message is that “the only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to decide... what has meaning and what doesn’t” (95), that salvation “involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort” (120). Wallace’s focus thus remains self-realization: the self remains isolated and entirely responsible as the achievement of real freedom remains purely individual, a matter of individual choice, will, and effort.

Lasch quotes Peter Marin’s “The New Narcissism” (1975) to criticize today’s “new therapies” because they “teach that “the individual will is all powerful and totally determines one’s fate”; thus they intensify the “isolation of the self” (Lasch 9). This is exactly what happens to Wallace, despite his intentions. Wallace sought salvation in worship and community but postulated that salvation is “a matter of my choosing to do the work” (*This Is Water* 44). In doing so, he reinvigorated the idea that my fate is determined by my willpower alone, which intensifies my self-isolation.

Within this ethical framework, why should I not feel superior for freeing myself from my default setting? And if I fail, why is that not entirely my fault? I failed because I chose not to do the work. Wallace attempted a shift of paradigm, but his ethics became another rat race because their foundation is free will and, therefore, self-determination. If free choice is the only capital-T Truth, then meaning and responsibility remain entirely individual, and the quality of one’s life exhibits one’s location in the human hierarchy. Who overcomes the default setting is meritorious and who fails is guilty. Wallace’s ethics cannot avoid these undesired conclusions. We thus begin to grasp the contradiction inherent in his thought and why his attempt to self-transcendence collapsed in the self-absorption that he was trying to escape.

5.3 Individualism

For Bauman, neoliberalism “hammer[s] home the message [that] troubles may be similar, [but] their most important similarity lies in being handled by each sufferer on his or her own.... The sole advantage the company of other sufferers may bring is to
reassure each one that fighting troubles alone is what all the others do daily—and so to
reinvigorate the flagging resolve to go on doing just that” (“Foreword” xvii).

Wallace agrees: “we seem to be in an era when oppression and exploitation no longer
bring people together and solidify loyalties and help everyone rise above his individual
concerns” (McCaffery 48). But then he again contradicts himself in practice. This Is
Water states that “how we construct meaning from experience [is] a matter of personal,
intentional choice” (28). This means that overcoming your default setting is your
choice and thus your responsibility. It is a matter of self-determination, as Wallace’s
linguistic choices make clear: if “you choose to do the work… it will actually be within
your power” (93) to achieve “real freedom” (121).

For Wallace, the capital-T Truth is free will, and this truth demands constant judgment
of self and others, loneliness, self-absorption, and paralyzing self-consciousness. You
cannot limit hyper-reflexivity when you know that all your shortcomings are your
fault. You cannot overcome the feeling that you must do it all by yourself when your
fate depends on your choices. Wallace pushes towards the overcoming of the neoliberal
ethos, but his deepest beliefs about human nature reaffirm it. His wish to overcome the
suffering of ontological loneliness contradicts his fundamental belief in free will.

Bauman decries that in neoliberalism “redemption and doom alike are of your making
and solely your concern” (Liquid Modernity 64), and that “the absence of happiness” is
your “full and sole responsibility” (Art of Life 15, 79). Wallace does too, but this
denunciation applies to him as well. Wallace establishes that “it is unimaginably hard
to” (This Is Water 135) overcome one’s default setting and that this overcoming is
achieved only through free choice and hard work. Free choice and hard work are the
necessary preconditions for the achievement of awareness, attentiveness, and
empathy. This once again entails that overcoming the default setting is a great
individual accomplishment, and therefore that the multitudes who go through their
“respectable adult life dead” (This Is Water 135) are those who did not put in the work.
They could have chosen otherwise but instead chose not to choose. Therefore, their
failure is their fault.

Of course, Wallace’s explicit words try to negate these conclusions, but the goal of this
analysis is to show that Wallace’s thought is forced to affirm them, given its premises.
Wallace’s beliefs entail that, if I remain a slave to my mind, that is my fault. If the only
capital-T Truth is my free choice, then I am ultimately alone in making my life what it
is. I reap what I sow. Where can reason for compassion, for limitation of hyper-
reflexivity and self-absorption, be when everyone is responsible for creating their own
lives? Nothing justifies escaping from constant self-judgment. In case of failure, self-
hatred is the coherent conclusion. And in case of success, a feeling of superiority.
Wallace felt this interpretation of the world to be the source of unbearable despair but
ultimately could not not believe it.

6. The Existentialist Contradiction

6.1 Neoliberalism Makes Existentialism Concrete

Wallace and the here-mentioned sociologists are all existentialists. They propose
existentialism as the solution to neoliberalism, but neoliberalism is the social
concretization of existentialism. This is the contradiction that this essay aims to bring
to light. This is their attempts to try to cure poison with poison. In Practices of Selfhood (2015), Bauman denounces our society’s abuse of the concept of “self-realization”: “a myth heavily exploited nowadays by the currently hegemonic neo-liberal ideology” (Bauman and Raud 64). For Bauman, this ideal generates our individualist ethos and disintegrates our sense of community, and Wallace agrees: our society “shifts ever more starkly from some community of relationships to networks of strangers connected by self-interest” (“E Unibus Pluram” 26).

27 But Bauman and Wallace also agree with what Camus writes in The Rebel (1951): every life is an individual work of art. Bauman dedicates The Art of Life to Camus: “life can’t not be a work of art if this is a human life—the life of a being endowed with will and freedom of choice” (52). Wallace quotes Camus among his all-time favourites and affirms the truth of existentialism throughout his works. For example, in “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness” (1999) he writes that “the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle” (64). And in “Back in New Fire” (1996) he reaffirms that “only the human will can defy, transgress, overcome, love: choose…. [N]othing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just are; the only good and bad things are people’s various choices in the face of what is” (169, 171).

28 These are all explicit affirmations of existentialism. But existentialism is a philosophy of self-realization. Its fundamental tenet is that you do not have a self unless you create it and that creating yourself is the purpose of your life. Therefore, the question arises again: if existentialism is true, why denounce neoliberalism’s worship of self and its emphasis on “the self-assertion of the individual” and on “the burden of responsibility” (Bauman, Liquid Modernity 29)? The truth of existentialism is that compulsory and obligatory self-determination is the only truth. An individual life is the work of art of a free being; therefore, life is compulsive and obligatory self-determination, whether you like it or not. What is there to denounce, then, in neoliberalism?

29 In Existentialism Is a Humanism (1945), Sartre writes that “man is nothing other than what he makes of himself” (22), that man is “solely responsible for his own existence” (23), and that “in fashioning myself I fashion man…. I am thus responsible for myself and for all men” (292). Sartre knew that this subjects every individual to extreme “anguish,” “abandonment,” and “despair” (25), but he coherently thought (within his existentialism) that it is one’s duty to overcome these difficulties alone. The foundation of existentialism is manifestly individualistic notwithstanding its proponents’ hopes for human communion.

30 “Self-realization” literary means “to make the self real,” to create the self, and self-realization is the ontology of existentialism. Now, Wallace is an existentialist who denounces neoliberalism’s worship of self-realization: the contradiction here is manifest (as it is in Sartre, Bauman, etc.). The cultural analyst Jim McGuigan saw that neoliberalism is the social concretization of existentialism. In “The Neoliberal Self” (2014), he wrote that “it is as though… existentialism… has lately achieved mass-popular diffusion. Now that the old collective supports and scripts no longer apply, everyone is abandoned to their fate like an angst-ridden French philosopher…. Although the Becks deny it, such a self—condemned to freedom and lonely responsibility—is exactly the kind of self cultivated by neoliberalism” (233-4).

31 Wallace rejects the current pathological state of neoliberalism, the social concretization of self-realization, but affirms the truth of existentialism, the ontology
of self-realization. This is the contradiction that entraps him and all other existentialist criticisms of contemporary society. In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman denounces that today “individualization is a fate, not a choice” (34), but in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre writes that “man is condemned to be free” (29). If man is condemned to be free, there is no reason to denounce the isolation of individuals in their freedom: that isolation is an ontological law of Being. Likewise, Wallace writes that a self is not “something you just have” (“Some Remarks on Kafka” 64,) but something you must realize by striving for “real freedom” (*This Is Water* 121) and by learning to “control... how and what you think” (53). Wallace regards self-realization as the ultimate truth, and so how can he reject society’s emphasis on self-realization?

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), David Harvey writes that “the founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as ‘the central values of civilization’” (5). In “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy” (2003), Wendy Brown explains that neoliberalism “convenes a ‘free’ subject who rationally deliberates about alternative courses of action, makes choices, and bears responsibility for the consequences of these choices” (7). Finally, in his “Interview with Ulrich Beck,” Jonathan Rutherford states that our time is “founded upon freedom, choice, the individual, and existential uncertainty” (210).

Like existentialism, neoliberalism affirms that free will is the capital-T Truth, and it structures society accordingly. Therefore, neoliberalism concretizes existentialism: the idea that life is a work of art. Wallace and the other mentioned sociologists attempt to affirm an ethics of compassion but their fundamental belief in free will entraps them into the same ontology that makes neoliberal individualism necessary. Wallace sees that individualism condemns us to anguish, loneliness, and despair. But the ontological individualism of existentialism remains for him the capital-T Truth. He feels that salvation can come only from awareness of “the mystical oneness of all things” (*This Is Water* 93). Yet, like Sartre and Camus, he ultimately believes that life is a work of art and therefore a matter of self-realization. He feels the despair inherent in this interpretation of the world, but he believes this to be the undeniable truth.

The following inscriptions are carved at the Rockefeller Center, dedicated to one of the greatest capitalists of all time and a Social Darwinist (see Hofstadter; Schultz and Schultz): “I believe in the supreme worth of the individual and in his right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”; “I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty.” This is what an ethics constructed on existentialism looks like. Likewise, Margaret Thatcher famously stated that “there is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women” (Mooers 45), and that “if you want to cut your own throat, don’t come to me for a bandage.” She said that because she believed that cutting one’s throat is a free choice, that human beings are endowed with free will. She was an existentialist who constructed her ethics accordingly. This is why the famous quote “watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become your character. And watch your character, for it becomes your destiny. What we think, we become” (Sorensen 22) was attributed to her just like it was attributed to endless other libertarians before her.

The distance between Thatcher and Wallace is infinite. But like Thatcher, Wallace believed that if you do not free yourself from your default setting that is ultimately
your fault. Given this fundamental ontological agreement, Wallace could not avoid Thatcherian conclusions. Thatcher’s ethics are thus more coherent than Wallace’s. If every individual is endowed with free will, then they bear full responsibility. Shortcomings originate within, and so do solutions. Do not knock on the other’s door for help that you do not deserve. You are a free agent. Your life is what you make it. You are alone. Your free will transcends every situation, every facticity. This is why existentialism calls it transcendence. You can always construct a better meaning, no matter the circumstances. There are no excuses.6

6.2 The Necessity of Ontological Insecurity

Anthony Giddens’s Modernity and Self-Identity (1991) reaches philosophical depths that only Wallace attains among the sociologists here mentioned. This is because, as Steven Loyal explains in The Sociology of Anthony Giddens (2003), Giddens’s work is constructed on the basis of “his earlier writings of ontology” (125). In addition, the strong influence of R.D. Laing’s The Divided Self (1960) on Giddens and Wallace testifies to their shared existentialism: Giddens builds his work on Laing’s notion of ontological insecurity; Wallace represents the consequences of ontological insecurity throughout his fiction. In this sense, one may say that Wallace’s fiction represents what Giddens diagnoses.7

Ultimately, ontological insecurity is the feeling that I and everyone and everything around me are nothing. To exemplify the feeling, Laing quotes a line from Kafka’s “Conversation with the Supplicant” (1936), which Giddens re-quotes and Wallace annotates in his copy of Laing’s book: “there has never been a time in which I have been convinced from within myself that I am alive” (Kafka 14). This line expresses the danger of ontological insecurity in existentialism: the feeling of the void of nothingness at the core of the self.

In Being and Nothingness (1943), Sartre defines humans as contingent beings: we have been nothing, will be nothing, and could have been nothing. Even what we are is our consciousness, which is our freedom, which is itself a nothingness. Our freedom is a nothingness because to be it must negate Being. If Being was all there was, nothing could be otherwise, and everything would be unchanging. Nothingness allows freedom to be. Destruction is needed for creation. Therefore, nothingness is our human core. Nothingness is our freedom to choose and transform. If human life is free, nothingness is. But what Sartre does not say is that, therefore, the dread of ontological insecurity is justified. Giacomo Leopardi is the thinker who thus brought existentialist ontology to its radical conclusion: he wrote in his Zibaldone (1817-32) that “I was frightened to find myself in the midst of nothingness, a nothing myself. I felt as if I were suffocating, thinking and feeling that all is nothing, solid nothing” (85).

Giddens and Wallace recognize that ontological insecurity is the unbearable dread, and they seek salvation from it. At times, they even condemn rationality for causing its horror. But in the end they always reaffirm the ontology of existentialism and so too the reality of nothingness. Giddens, for example, intuits that rationality produces “a paralysis of the will, or feelings of engulfment” (3) so unbearable that it overcomes the individual. Accordingly, he writes that ontological security requires “trust” (3), a “leap of faith” (3): life must be “given over to fate” (183) if one is to be relieved from the nothingness of one’s being and from the overwhelming weight of one’s freedom. Yet, subsequently, a shift occurs in his language, and he writes that ontological security is
“emotional rather than simply cognitive” (37-8). This is a partial retraction of the idea of ontological security as faith because it means that security is partly—even if not wholly—rational. Security is now no longer a matter of faith but a functional combination of rational and emotional responses.

This contradicts Giddens’s prior assertion that ‘no one can show that it is not “rational” (183) to be devoured by “radical doubt” (21). Initially, then, Giddens feels the necessity of insecurity within the rational worldview, and so he turns to faith. Ultimately, though, he attempts to save rationality as itself necessary for security. This conclusion contradicts the premise, forcing Giddens to waver within the rationality he was trying to escape.

This is exactly what happens in Wallace. *This Is Water* is again paradigmatic because it establishes that ontological insecurity originates within “the natural, basic self-centeredness” (37) of our default setting, and that salvation lies in the “worship” (101) of something other than the self. Like Giddens, Wallace retraces the origin of despair in the thought of self-sufficiency—the rationality of free will—and he seeks salvation in the Kierkegaardian leap of faith, believing that worship can be a conscious choice. But a conscious choice is a cognitive endeavour that originates in the rationality of the free independent self. To claim that faith is a choice is to claim that free will—the self-sufficiency of the individual—is the ultimate truth (because choice, the manifestation of free will, is thus the foundation of faith). It is to claim that the content of faith depends on the individual’s decision. Effectively, it is to grant ontological priority to the individual over God. It is to remain trapped within the domain of rationality, self-determination, and self-realization; that is, within the ontological insecurity from which Wallace and Giddens were seeking salvation.

Only Grace can avoid this contradiction and bestow salvation from the nothingness of ontological insecurity. Wallace and Giddens turn to faith but ultimately cannot believe in Grace. This inability is exemplified in the 12-step program in *Infinite Jest* too. AA initially tells its addicts that salvation is faith or, in other words, the surrender of the will: “your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in” (357). AA says that to be saved “you have to surrender your will” (357) and to receive “what’s called The Gift of Desperation” (354), the gift of “Blind Faith” (351). This is necessary for recovery to work, and as far as rational argument goes: “Just Do It they say, and like a shock-trained organism without any kind of independent human will you do exactly like you’re told” (350).

Salvation here is synonymous with the complete renunciation of self, will, freedom, and rationality. Salvation is the Gift of Blind Faith. But then the shift occurs, and AA’s principle becomes that “you have to want to surrender your will” (357). Now, you have to want to surrender your will. Now, it is not enough to surrender. You have to choose to surrender. Salvation is not a gift anymore. It depends on your free choice, now. This again contradicts AA’s own premises. It is the same contradiction we have seen before. Initially, AA knows that your will “is the web your Disease sits and spins in.” Then, it looks precisely within the will to find the will to surrender the will. This is an attempt to cure poison with poison: once again, AA cannot renounce its belief in free will as the capital-T Truth.

This must condemn AA addicts to entrapment in ontological insecurity because the will is the Disease and the program itself is incapable of renouncing its attachment to the Disease. Proof of the entrapment is that salvation ultimately becomes a matter of the
addict’s free choice. At one point, the novel explicitly states that whether an addict saves himself from his will “is his choice and on him alone” (363). The contradiction is once again manifest. Salvation was supposed to entail the renunciation of the will but now spirals back into individualism. One cannot will oneself out of one’s will. Such attempt is wilful. There is no escape from the Disease within the Disease.

Heidegger, another existentialist thinker familiar to Wallace, was haunted by the same contradiction. In the “Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking” (1959), Heidegger introduces salvation as “Gelassenheit,” meaning to “want non-willing,” to “willingly renounce willing” (59). He tries to indicate the same profundity that Wallace, Giddens, AA, and Kierkegaard have in sight: that willing is the Disease. But he too ends up contradicting himself by conceiving liberation as a willing not to will, which traps him in a vicious cycle. As a result, he remains trapped within the dimension that he knows to be the source of unredeemable suffering. The absolute aloneness and nothingness of individual willing cannot be overcome by the free choice of the individual will because free choice belongs to the same nothingness. To define liberation as an existentialist task is to remain trapped within the web of the Disease.

This is the logical consequence of the premises that Wallace set down as an existentialist philosopher. The ideal of the existentialist task is founded upon free will and, therefore, cannot but exacerbate individualism, even when the goal is self-transcendence. The necessary consequence of this ethics is that my life is my sole responsibility, that ontological security (sanity and happiness) belongs to the meritorious and ontological insecurity (insanity and despair) to the unworthy.

If free will is true, my despair is my fault, a measure of the powerlessness of my will. In The Pale King, Claude Sylvanshine is a coherent existentialist: he interprets his unhappiness as proof that he is “weak and defective in the area of will” (14). If free will is the capital-T Truth, there is no escape from self-absorption and its inherent suffering. Wallace knew how unbearable this suffering could be. He wished to overcome it but was unable to. In “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” (1995), Wallace (like the Buddha and Schopenhauer before him) says that the will makes life “unbearably sad” (261) and that “the Big lie” (316) is that the will can “be sated” (316).² For a moment, there, Wallace feels that salvation may lie in “some kind of marvellous distended moment of transferring control to large automatic forces” (284). He feels that salvation may be the Gift of Grace, a Gift that has nothing to do with free choice. This moment recurs in the essay on “Tennis Player Michael Joyce” (1996), when Wallace writes that “it’s the very surrender of choice and self that informs the love in the first place” (228). Here, love appears again as the complete surrender of individuality, a surrender that simply happens, a surrender that has nothing to do with free choice. This surrendering is only the bestowal of Grace, Grace that need not be religious at all.

This feeling comes again to Wallace as the initial belief of AA and as the oneness of all things that This Is Water invokes. Yet, the truth is that Wallace (the intentionality within the texts that bear his name) never believed in it. This is what his works testify. Wallace could never abandon his fundamental belief in free will. He could not interpret life as anything but an existentialist task. He could not shake the feeling that the capital-T Truth is that I am in charge and therefore alone at the centre of all creation, entirely responsible for my own universe. Wallace felt the unbearable despair inherent in this interpretation of the world, but he always believed it to be the truth. His work is pervaded by the contradiction between his hope of self-transcendence and his
fundamental belief in the sovereignty of the self. His profound awareness of this entrapment is his legacy.

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NOTES

1. An indication of the pervasiveness of sociology in Wallace’s work is that, while critics generally consider “E Unibus Pluram” and the McCaffery interview as the nexus that composes Wallace’s manifesto, said manifesto is in truth a system of essays and interviews that revolves around *EUP* and *TIW* and includes, most prominently, the essays “Fictional Futures,” “The Empty Plenum,” “David Lynch,” and “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” and the interviews with McCaffery, Kennedy and Polk, Lipsky, and Miller. In the final analysis, the manifesto extends from “Fictional Futures” (1988) to “Just Asking” (2007); that is, from the first to the last of Wallace’s published writings.

2. McLaughlin (”Post-Postmodern Discontent”) and den Dulk (*Existentialist Engagement*) particularly highlight the responsive character of Wallace’s fiction.

3. See Boswell (*Understanding*), Holland (“Art’s Heart”), and Hering (*Fiction and Form*).

4. His fundamental belief in free will is testified in all his writings, starting with his undergraduate philosophy thesis, published under the title *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2011).

5. For further proof of Wallace’s existentialism see Zadie Smith (“Brief Interviews”), Lucas Thompson (Global *Wallace*), Allard den Dulk (“Good Faith,” *Existentialist Engagement*, and *Infinite Jest* as Contemporary Core Text”), and Pitari (“The Influence of Sartre” and “The Influence of Tolstoy”).

6. This argument may remind readers of the criticism that Dreyfus and Kelly aimed at Wallace in *All Things Shining* (2011). There are undeniable points of contact between this thesis and theirs. Their view is persuasive, and scholars have largely failed to respond to it (despite contrary widespread belief in the field). Yet, the present exhibition of the existentialist contradiction can be applied to their work as well.

7. Wallace’s annotated copy of *The Divided Self* is available at the David Foster Wallace archive at the Harry Ransom Center. For more on Laing’s influence on Wallace see Burn (”Webs of Nerves”), Sloane (*DFW and the Body* and ”The Divided Selves”), de Bourcier (“They All Sound”), and Redgate (“DFW’s Treatment of Therapy”).

8. On the connection between Wallace and Schopenhauer see Bennet (”Inside DFW’s Head”) and Vermeule (”The Terrible Master”).
ABSTRACTS

This essay argues that Wallace's non-fiction presents a sociology that constitutes the foundation of Wallace's literary project. By tracing the influences of Wallace's sociology and by contrasting Wallace's non-fictional works with those of Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Christopher Lasch, this essay provides a necessary contribution to an adequate critique of the foundation of Wallace's literary ethics. Finally, the analysis proposes that an existentialist contradiction pervades Wallace's work. This contradiction revolves around the problem of free will, and it characterizes a particularly strong wave of contemporary western ethics.

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Keywords: philosophical fiction, individual freedom, neoliberalism, existentialism

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