

## **Walter Kaufmann and the Future of the Humanities**

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*...And woe unto all the living that it would live without disputes over weight and scales and weighers! —Nietzsche, Zarathustra, II, 13*

### **Introduction:**

#### **What's at Stake in Discussing the Future of the Humanities**

The start of 21st century may very well be the final era in which the humanities enjoy substantial autonomy and prestige. Advances in genetics, evolutionary and biological psychology, combined with the increasing sophistication of statistical models of behavior prediction, may make current justifications for the study of the humanities sound quaint at best, and obscurantist at worse. To be sure, the end of the humanities has been predicted before, and its decline or demise may never happen.<sup>1</sup> this essay is not written in the hope that it will happen, only with the awareness that, as Walter Kaufmann put it, “the refusal to reflect on goals invites disaster.”<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the following pages will consider the prospects for the humanities without two implicit, and wishfully sentimental, assumptions, namely that, without the humanities, something irreplaceably precious will be lost, or that, once we move beyond the humanities, what follows would inevitably be better. The fact is that we simply don't know how educational practices will look from the standpoint of future generations.<sup>3</sup> Rather; our task should be to identify what is most valuable in the humanities, asking whether our current practices in fact achieve our goals.

Hence, this essay seeks aid in the discussion of aims and means by turning to Walter Kaufmann who, a generation ago, had some interesting ideas about what was at stake in the study of the humanities. I will present some of Kaufmann's main views on this subject, highlighting the ongoing relevance of his sharp critique of contemporary education. Specifically, I will focus on his mostly forgotten 1977 volume, *The Future of the Humanities*, arguing that it is not only worth reading today, but may help the humanities maintain their viability altogether. To reach this end, I will place Kaufmann in his historical context, providing an exposition of his main pedagogical ideas, focusing especially on what he called "the art of reading."<sup>4</sup> Once a picture of Kaufmann's main contribution has emerged, I will finish the piece by linking Kaufmann to a well-publicized concern in pedagogy, namely Gerald Graff's efforts to integrate students into academic "argument culture" by "teaching the conflicts."<sup>5</sup> This sets the stage for an overarching conclusion, where I argue that, while Kaufmann certainly does not allay all anxieties about the future of the humanities, his ideas about education (primarily, though not exclusively, college education) prepare us well to face a critical and neglected aspect of the problem: our own uncertainties and sense of doubt as to whether we instructors can convey something of value in the humanities altogether.

### **Who Was Walter Kaufmann and Why Should Pedagogy Care?**

Walter Kaufmann (1921-1980) was a prolific and incisive writer who deserves much more attention than he has yet received. Spending his career as professor of philosophy at Princeton, Kaufmann's specialty was German philosophy and through that he is not entirely unknown today. For the most part, "academic public opinion" tends to remember him as a transmitter and popularizer, more than a thinker in his own right. This incorrect assumption tends to impede a full appreciation of Kaufmann's work. To be sure, Kaufmann played a significant role in bringing central European thought to the United States. He was one of the first to produce reliable translations of Nietzsche to a broad American public. His 1954, *The Portable Nietzsche*, included *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and by the end of his career, Kaufmann had provided accurate and readable translations of eleven of Nietzsche's major works.<sup>6</sup> These, along with Kaufmann's own 1950 monograph (revised and expanded in 1956, 1968 and 1974) *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* gave Nietzsche a prominent place in American academia, one that he never held before, and has never lost since.<sup>7</sup> This work alone would have earned Kaufmann a solid place in American intellectual history, but for Kaufmann it was only one project among many. Many more of

his translations and anthologies changed and deepened America's appreciation for European thought. Special mention should be made of his 1956 volume, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*.<sup>8</sup> Still in print today, for three generations of college students it has remained one of the sources of existentialist literature.

Yet making the works of others accessible was only a portion of Kaufmann's contribution to the humanities. He was a philosopher in his own right, writing several interesting and idiosyncratic works in the philosophy of religion, ethics, and aesthetics. Notable among them are the *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (1958) and *The Faith of a Heretic* (1960).<sup>9</sup> The main thrust of these books has not been dated, as they provide critical exploration of the nature and limitations of religion by someone familiar with religion's history, as well as the psychological, aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of the subject. Obviously, to cover all of Kaufmann's efforts would require a volume of its own. However, his credentials as a humanist can be set forth: the very titles of some of his works like *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1968) or *Religions in Four Dimensions* (1974) show that Kaufmann understood his task to be interdisciplinary, attentive to questions of philology and translation and historical in scope.<sup>10</sup> When it came time to reflect directly on education his thoughts grew out of his own practice. *The Future of the Humanities* contains the ideas of a writer who spent his life not simply theorizing about, but pursuing the humanities.

### Exile and Belonging

It is not enough to know that Kaufmann, by his own standards, was a humanist; to comprehend his concerns fully, we should know something about how he became one. Thus, a biographical point about Kaufmann helps in this context. As maverick as he was, he did fit into an important sociological group. Kaufmann was a German-Jewish refugee, who escaped to America as a teenager in 1939. The memory of the persecution he saw and experienced colored his approach to writing and lent it an air of existential urgency. In a world where so many did not survive, or were forced to live without their freedom, Kaufmann would make his engagement with the humanities matter. All this is essential background for understanding Kaufmann's case, since his thoughts on education arose directly from his experience in both the old and new worlds. Like other Jewish émigré scholars—Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Karl Popper come to mind—Kaufmann was preoccupied with the concern that civilization not succumb to the forces of organized irrationality.<sup>11</sup> He belonged to a cohort that was educated in the highest

traditions of European civilization, but which witnessed the triumph of “neo-barbarism.”

Yet, even here Kaufmann did not quite fit in with the other. Although he enjoyed a rigorous *Gymnasium* education, complete with classical languages, he was younger than other refugee scholars. Hence, the Germany he came to know was one seen through the eyes of a teenager belonging to a shunned and persecuted minority. Kaufmann never felt the nostalgia for Europe or the German patriotism common in the older generation. Indeed, unlike them, his education was as much American as it was European. Arriving alone in America at age seventeen, Kaufmann was able to attend Williams College, where by dint of hard work he received his B.A. in 1941. His graduate studies in philosophy were interrupted by the Second World War. After being discharged from the service, his doctorate was granted in 1947. In a sense, Kaufmann saw some of the best of old and new world education. It is this atypical background that sets the stage for his wider reflections.

### Philosophy as Subversion

Is there a dominant theme in Kaufmann’s work? Answering this question can begin to help us understand what he expected from the humanities, as well as from education in the humanities. Although Kaufmann never associated himself with a particular school or specific cause, his writings continually emphasize the transformative and unsettling potential of thought. Perhaps this dissatisfaction with things as they are is why, though Kaufmann never fully caught on with academic philosophers, he maintains a degree of popularity among undergraduates and a wider reading public.<sup>12</sup> Kaufmann himself seems to have relished this outsider status. His works were sharply critical of what he considered to be a strain of escapism in the professional philosophy of his day. What appealed to him in philosophy was—to adapt Alcibiades’ words in the *Symposium*—its Socratic capacity to make one ashamed of the life he or she is living.<sup>13</sup> This does not require the philosopher to be completely right, as much as it demands they identify errors and prod others to reach higher. As Kaufmann put it in a 1958 work, long before the notion of “subversion” was fashionable, “philosophy subverts man’s satisfaction with himself, exposes custom as a questionable dream, and offers not so much solutions as a different life.”<sup>14</sup> When he turned to pedagogy, therefore, it was not to restore the validity of an enduring canon, nor was it to advocate a new turn, in the direction of relevance. Rather, it was to confront an enduring problem, one made more pressing by the increasing prominence of the sciences. This problem can be defined as one of “blindness.” As he put it:

Blindness can be taught and has been for centuries. A great deal of education has always been indoctrination. Students were taught what to see and exhorted not to see inconvenient facts, alternatives, or even their own beliefs. Piety consisted in staying inside, in the dark, believing what you were told. To see for yourself or go outside to find out how your beliefs looked when you stepped back far enough was impiety.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, when he claimed that that, “the sad condition of the humanities should be a matter of vital concern for all of us,” he meant that the obvious blindness of previous ages was not really overcome. It was simply replaced with less visible “pieties.”<sup>16</sup> He is hardly alone in seeing conformity in academia,<sup>17</sup> so to understand him further we should ask what, specifically, his version of the problem?

### Reading as Key

Put most directly, the problem is that teachers of the humanities fail to read well, and are passing this failure on to their students.<sup>18</sup> Kaufmann thought the humanities were only justified to the extent that they cultivated what can be called “the authenticity of reading.” What this meant was that, “we must allow ourselves to be addressed by a text; we must hearken for its distinctive voice; we must try to discern how it differs from all other voices. We must permit it to challenge shock and offend us.”<sup>19</sup> However, in the practices he saw around him, he charged that, “one reads without encountering a You and takes no chances of suffering culture shock.” The problem was that, “though written by men and women, the texts are dehumanized and read in a parochial spirit.”<sup>20</sup> Even very sophisticated methodological approaches can deflect attention away from a text’s individual challenge.<sup>21</sup>

To clarify what he meant Kaufmann identified three strategies of evasion. They are “exegetical,” “dogmatic,” and “agnostic” reading, and he felt they were common in humanities courses, past as well as present. All are variant ways of not thinking about a text’s central problems and the challenges they pose to our view of things. “Exegetes,” for Kaufmann, “first endowed the text with authority, then read their own ideas into it, and then got them back endowed with authority.”<sup>22</sup> If the message of the Gospel of St. John is “determined” to be completely compatible with, say, Marxism or existentialism, and then declared to be true because it is the Bible, we are reading exegetically. This shades into dogmatic reading, whereby readers take the stance, “we know and he doesn’t.”<sup>23</sup> If the books of Islamic *Hadith* or Jewish *Midrash* are measured by the standards of Christian theological dogma and then found to be lacking, then, for Kaufmann, this is reading dogmatically. As he put charged,

“the dogmatic reader avoids self-exposure, blinds himself to alternatives and objections, and refuses to see what is distinctive in the text and could not just as well be found at home.”<sup>24</sup> Finally, there is agnostic approach, which revolves around “suspending judgment” about the truth. For Kaufmann, it can take on a myriad of forms, but always involves not thinking about the text’s primary messages. The variant that he found most prevalent in his own day was the “microscopic,” meaning that “one no longer has breath enough to read a book several times to get a whole view, not to speak of an author’s oeuvre. One prefers to study one poem, one passage or one argument. In this way the author is spirited away, the encounter with a challenging You is avoided, and one deals with small pieces that can be taken apart.”<sup>25</sup> If these strategies of evasion are followed, blindness, rather than insight, is taught.

### Missing the Obvious

At this point, a reader may wish to raise two objections. First, a great deal of the past generation’s “theory” has disputed the notion that one can approach a text in an unmediated fashion.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, isn’t there something naïve about Kaufmann’s contention that students can access the distinctive “You” in any given text. Second, isn’t what Kaufmann has to say obvious? After all, who consciously argues for parochialism in the reading and teaching of texts? Kaufmann, therefore, will never convince those he is most trying to reach.

These two objections, placed together, are somewhat contradictory. However, they add up to a consistent enough claim that what Kaufmann said is familiar, and hasn’t the force to challenge current ways of doing things. In such a case, it is pointless to respond to these objections with the contradictory assertion that Kaufmann is, indeed, relevant. That will only convince those already on Kaufmann’s side. Rather, the best approach is to practice a bit of what he preached and to spend a bit of time uncovering Kaufmann’s own, distinctive presence.

Here, consider again his situation in 1939. As precocious as Kaufmann may have been when he landed in the U.S., attending college, by American standards, was the natural choice for him. However, at that time, Kaufmann thought in European terms, and believed that his natural path was to proceed straight on to specialized study of philosophy. As he understood it, the American system was only putting another obstacle in his way. As he described his thought process at the time, “Having graduated from a German secondary school, I could have entered a (German, D.P.) university and obtained a doctorate in three years, had it not been for Hitler.”<sup>27</sup> But as it turned out, his time at Williams was not only helpful

to him, but marked out his own ideas of what education should be. He said that, “in a way a good liberal arts college is an isle of the blessed in a cruel world,” going on to add:

I can think of no better way of showing this than to recall my own experience of coming to such a college in 1939. I had left Nazi Germany, crossed the Atlantic in a hurricane, and suddenly found myself in an altogether different world. In ever so many tangible ways, I encountered freedom. The students could pursue their intellectual interests and the professors could do the same. It would have been boorish to ask about the purpose of all of this; it was so beautiful.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, what is beautiful may not be up to the challenges the world presents. Kaufmann noted that on the eve of America’s entry into World War Two, in which a number of his fellow students were to die, Williams College, “might almost as well have been on the moon,”<sup>29</sup> so distant did it seem from the catastrophes unfolding in Europe and Asia. Exacerbating this tendency, and making it more harmful, was an ongoing spiritual insularity:

It was in those days that it was considered admirable for a teacher to be Socratic...But it was difficult to find professors who ran any risk of ever being accused of impiety, as Socrates was. One was genteel and did not think of questioning the faith and morals of one’s society—at least not in one’s own way, without the support of any rival creed or ideology, like Socrates.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, while Kaufmann did indeed see great potential in American education, he also saw it as potential unfulfilled. It was this experience, filtered through his tremendous energy and prodigious learning that ultimately culminated in *The Future of the Humanities*.

But it was not only this experience. America’s victory, The Cold War, and all its attendant social transformations forever changed the American university, moving away from what Kaufmann called “the age of teacups” to the “age of specialization.”<sup>31</sup> In this era—one that is still with us—research, expansion of capacities and technique and professionalization dominate individual and collective agendas. Kaufmann was not utterly opposed to specialization (the same way he was not utterly opposed to the sheltered freedom of the old-fashioned liberal arts college). Yet, as he saw it, “some realize that specialization is an indispensable propaedeutic. Others go on to specialize more and more to become great experts on something so small and often trivial that nobody except a few other pedants in the same boat would ever like to hear about it. That is the direction in which the humanities have moved since the 1950s and they did not start from scratch even then.”<sup>32</sup>

Exacerbating matters was the fact that Kaufmann felt students were arriving at universities without the mastery of basic skills that would enable them to focus on their studies, making disciplined progress from there. Thus, at the worst, a small circle tends to cultivate the humanities in an overly narrow fashion, while the majority dabbles in the humanities without any though understanding of how to advance.<sup>33</sup> For different reasons, members of each group are unlikely to be reached by the material to which they are exposed. What mattered most to him was that the expanded, ever more market driven, pursuit of the humanities on American campuses not squander its opportunities to provoke Socratic questioning and critical self-reflection.<sup>34</sup> Making use of these opportunities was essential to Kaufmann's own "distinctive You." After all, he saw himself what happened when these Socratic opportunities were not taken.

### **To Teach the Students**

Of course, leaning more about Kaufmann's sensibilities does not directly settle the concerns raised earlier. We must still ask what distinguishes Kaufmann's suggestions from other critiques (and complaints) about the state of the humanities. Here, we can turn to a specific proposal Kaufmann made for a course in comparative religion. As Kaufmann's friend, Saul Goldwasser, rightly pointed out, for Kaufmann, "religious texts provide the perfect subject matter for Socratic scrutiny, and dialectical reading."<sup>35</sup> Kaufmann made this point by noting that, "it is in religion that faith and morals are encountered par excellence, and in different religions, if not different sects and phases of the same ones, we find radically divergent faiths and moral views."<sup>36</sup> His proposed one-term course would cover parts of the Old and New Testaments, the Koran, The Dhammapada, The Bhagavad-Gita, the Confucian Analects and the Tao-Teh-Ching.<sup>37</sup> The most important consequence of the course would be that students see that these works do not necessarily say what they think religion teaches, and that compared to each other, all outline distinctive ways of life, ones that spark an existential awareness of human choices and limitations.

Thus, Kaufmann's view should not be equated with the conservative notion that there is a set canon of unchanging classics and enduring verities. Rather, each text has its own history, and students should grasp something of the conflict-laden manner in which it took shape and developed. By the same token, seeing texts historically does not entail reading one's own ideas into a work, or substituting more amenable texts for those that have been, historically, most challenging and influential. Kaufmann charged that, "more and more students graduate from college having read a lot of recent articles and books that are but a short



while later as dated and forgotten as of most of last year's headlines. Meanwhile, even art historians rarely know the Bible."<sup>38</sup>

What, specifically, made Kaufmann's proposed course better? Two advantages can be singled out. First, they would treat religious texts in an interdisciplinary fashion. In Kaufmann's understanding, those within a disciplinary specialty should take the trouble to explain clearly to those outside it why they thought one way, rather than another. Such efforts are central because "they force us to step back sufficiently to see the context of our specialty and become aware of our assumptions."<sup>39</sup> In an undergraduate class, the instructor may have to "play all the disciplines," but the students should acquire some sense of what it does and does not mean to look at a text in different ways. Second, his course encouraged students to think about translation, broadly defined. Kaufmann did not simply suggest that "The Bible" be assigned to students. He wanted those unable to read it in the original to, at least, compare various translations, and think about meanings and perspectives that might be lost. This was not a minor concern for him. He devoted a section of *The Future of the Humanities* to discussing translation and its problems. A comment he made on the failure to take notice of these matters reveals something of his overall pedagogical goals. The smaller issue under discussion was the fact that Freud is often read exclusively in what is called "The Standard Translation." Kaufmann used this to make a larger point:

Freud was one of the greatest writers of our century, and he is extremely difficult to translate. Anyone who tries to translate no more than the quotations he needs in a scholarly discussion of Freud quickly finds how much is lost in the process. Moreover, Freud, more than anyone with the possible exception of Nietzsche, has taught us to attend to nuances, and it is odd that people writing seriously about him should feel no need whatsoever to do so.<sup>40</sup>

In the classroom, the goal would be to guard against such parochialism by making the difficulties of translation an ongoing spur to candor and self-reflection. Indeed, consideration of the hazards of translation is an initial step in a path of discovery. By this method, students truly would be exposed to alternative world views. Hence, they would be forced to decide what speaks for and against them.

### **Quest for Engagement**

But doesn't every teacher of the humanities try to do all this anyway? This is a difficult issue because if one speaks in generalities there is a tendency to amalgamate Kaufmann's concerns to a generalized quest for "engagement" that is very common in the literature on the humanities

and its pedagogy.<sup>41</sup> Hence; I want to provide a brief comparison between Kaufmann's approach and other, popular, ideas. First, it is worth noting that Kaufmann's ideas cut across ideological divides. Take, for instance, a debate on "active learning" or a "student centered classroom." By Kaufmann's standards this could cut either way. Students given informal or community building exercises may engage the spirit of a text more closely, and then again, they may not. The important issue is the discovery of the particular challenge of the text. We should not lose sight of this goal.

This leads to a second point, one where we can introduce Gerald Graff. He has argued that have argued that humanities instructors should "teach the conflicts," which in practice means that they should be introduced to secondary, critical literature, and then clarifying to students what is at stake in this academic conversation. While I share a number of Graff's concerns, from a Kaufmann-ian standpoint, it is worth asking whether there truly is an academic conversation, or only a series of time-bound and sectarian controversies. After all, reading and discussing six scholarly articles on St. Thomas Aquinas may help students form their own ideas about him, but then again it may not. Suppose four of those articles accepted all of St. Thomas' presuppositions unquestioningly, while a fifth denounced him for being a tool of feudal landlords, and the six is not really interested in anything except the ways some ideas from the *Summa Theologica* can be taken from their original context and used to endorse the ideas of a much different philosopher who lived hundreds of years later. To be sure, even if Graff will not use a term like "spirit of the text," he does want the scholarly criticism that students read to direct attention to uncovering the text's possible meanings.

But what are students then to do after they use secondary sources to uncover possible meanings? In *Beyond the Culture Wars*, Graff approached this issue in a sidelong fashion by maintaining that since "there is, alas, no trouble free zone of reading,"<sup>42</sup> we might as well avoid turning our classes into "non-communicating monologues" and teach the intellectual controversies about what this meaning is. If students were taught these intellectual conflicts over a poem like "Dover Beach," then, according to Graff, "they might also find it easier to make out the sense of the poem, for the controversy over it might give them the sort of context for reading it that they probably lack." Yet, immediately after saying this, Graff attaches a significant condition, namely that:

The controversy would have to be presented in a way that avoids the pedantry, obscurity and technicality to which academics are notoriously prone. And even when these vices are avoided, some students will have as much trouble seeing why they should interest themselves in a critical debate over "Dover Beach" as in "Dover Beach" itself.<sup>43</sup>

Graff goes on to attribute students' indifference or incomprehension to their "alienation from academic intellectual culture,"<sup>44</sup> which leads him to the conclusion that this "is all the more reason for teaching the debate."<sup>45</sup> But putting it this way simply leads us back to the place that Kaufmann began, i.e., the task of letting the text somehow challenge our ideas and beliefs.<sup>46</sup> If humanities instructors have no clear idea of this, how will they ever know whether they are indeed overcoming student alienation and teaching conflicts? As Kaufmann put it, "every reader tends to see what he likes and not see what makes him uncomfortable. Least of all does one think of the author as a human being like oneself."<sup>47</sup> Humanistic education will only be effective if it strives to overcome this partial vision. Pedagogy aiming to "teach the conflicts" should be informed by the Socratic ethos that Kaufmann evokes. Indeed, for college students to profit from teaching the conflicts at all their earlier education must prepare to have high standards of responsibility in making intellectual judgments. Graff seems to want these standards, but does not talk about what they are or how students are to obtain them. This point was brought out well in a perceptive and critical review of *Clueless in Academe* by Sandra Stotsky. She made the point that college English students are unlikely to use Graff's guidelines to integrate themselves into intellectual culture if, earlier, "they have not learned that they must first read and try to understand what the author wrote."<sup>48</sup> From this perspective, Kaufmann's work is not only relevant for debates in higher education, but for discussions of education as a whole.

### Back to Ourselves

In the end, Kaufmann re-directs attention from questions about technique and sectarian academic schools to focus it on purposes and goals. One of the nastiest—but I think one of the most helpful—comments he made in his book concerns the doleful consequences of an academic system that discouraged reflection on these themes:

For roughly twenty years, from about 1950 until 1970, large numbers of students entered graduate schools and then went on to teach philosophy, or history, or religion, literature, or art, without ever having seriously reflected on their goals. Going into graduate work was rarely experienced as a fateful plunge; on the contrary, it meant staying in school for a few more years, a prolongation of the status quo.<sup>49</sup>

Kaufmann concluded:

Obviously, something had gone wrong in education some time before this.

When so many people trained in the humanities, and quite especially in philosophy had examined their own lives and goals so little, their own training must have been a far cry from the heritage of Socrates.<sup>50</sup>

As I see it, this is not a personal swipe (or, not only one). Instructors willing to reflect on their own goals probably (perhaps not invariably) will be willing to reflect on and confront the intertwined goals of a text.<sup>51</sup> This starts the “culture shock.”

It is also what makes Kaufmann relevant to ongoing practical discussions in education, ones involving assessment and testing. It is obvious from Kaufmann’s reverence for texts that he would be hostile to humanities education that focused on what it called “process” in distinction to the specific arguments and visions contained in any given work. For this same reason, it is not surprising to learn that Kaufmann looked with suspicion in the assessment humanities education. Speaking not only of multiple choice exams, but of an essay competition where there is an overriding moral and intellectual consensus of what constitutes the right answer he notes that “such tests serve notice that what is desired is scholasticism.” Then he adds:

Those with a vision of their own or, more simply, students with some originality are not favored by such tests; and the Socratically inclined who love to question the consensus and who look with a critical eye and the four answers of which one and only one is supposed to be right learn that this posture does not pay. More important still, more and more secondary school teachers precisely at the best schools in which many students want to go on to a good college began to prepare their students for these tests. Students who were not used to such tests were at a great disadvantage; students whose education had been designed to prepare them for these tests had been trained not to be Socratic or original.<sup>52</sup>

There is a link between this system of testing and assessment and corps of humanities instructors who do not confront their own “big picture.”<sup>53</sup> In each case, for Kaufmann, the prospects for the humanities depend on more than adopting new policies. He wants its adherents to take a different attitude toward themselves. The practical implications of this will be spelled out in the conclusion.

### **Conclusion: Reflection and Goals**

Here are some practical suggestions I feel follow from a reading of Kaufmann. They are an elaboration on what Graff called the “so what” question. Both those sympathetic and unsympathetic with everything said so far will want to know whether *The Future of the Humanities* has indeed actually shaped anyone’s teaching. Here are two ways it influenced mine:

◆ Kaufmann's book strengthened an already held opinion that what is really at stake in the humanities is honesty. In particular, Kaufmann's book makes a good case that humanities classes should be "Socratic" in the sense that they enable us to identify unexamined assumptions in past and present civilizations, and then consider their viability. In practice, this means that the texts I assign (my canon) are texts I think lead us to confront reigning values, either reaffirming or critiquing them (or both). Following this, I ask students to read and discuss the works where they must keep asking themselves whether they are truthfully identifying the texts main challenges, and whether they are grappling with these challenges with genuine candor. My writing assignments are more systematized versions of these two questions. Though my classes are for undergraduates, I see no reason why teachers of younger students could not adapt Kaufmann's ideas for their own ends.

◆ Saying that the humanities are about honesty raises a highly charged issue in current pedagogical debates, namely accountability. How does one hold an instructor accountable for conveying the distinctive voice of a text, or for exposing students to the challenge it represents? Kaufmann's suspicion of standardized testing should not be taken to mean that he recognized no gauge for assessing integrity in teaching. Rather, he would ask us to redirect our attention to justifications offered for a particular course of study. This would require faculty and departments, on the one hand, to describe in more detail what they expect students to learn, paying attention not to abstractions and generalizations, but to the distinctive particularities of the works studied. On the other hand, it would ask students and member of the public in general to be more forthcoming about what they expect to retain. Humanities instructors can be accountable for the ways they present the challenges of the material, but they cannot be accountable for an individual's capacity to make something of this experience. In this respect, the true test of accountability for both students and teachers is their ongoing commitment to remember what they study and incorporate its lessons into their lives. From this angle, though Kaufmann may not endorse testing in a narrow sense, he might be taken to call for it in a broader one. It would be both helpful and revealing if not only students, but faculty, administrators, state legislators, journalists, clergy and anyone else taking public stands on the state of education would submit to substantive tests on the depth and quality of their general education. These exams might not produce the most reassuring results. However, in an age where US Congressmen serving on important foreign policy committees are unable to tell the difference between Shiites and Sunnis,<sup>54</sup> such self-recognition would point out the

need for Kaufmann's main claim that we must reflect continually on education's purpose. It would also force us to ask not only whether are humanities classes are effective, but why this is the case.

Finally, Kaufmann's book helps one cope with the inevitable mortality of the humanities, and its possible replacement by new branches of the natural sciences. Just as the votive statues and oracle bones of past ages testify to the very large number of human values systems that have been forgotten, ignored or abandoned, so too, future generations (should there be any) could easily relegate all our current efforts to a small, esoteric, and perhaps not entirely edifying, nook in the history of the human knowledge. Nevertheless, what future generations might or might not think should not influence us. Someday people may eliminate the need for rational discussion, the encounter with distinctive points of view, and the honest consideration of alternatives. Until now, the natural sciences have not been able to come up with viable replacements for these practices. Perhaps they never will, though it seems probable that they will make some very good efforts in trying. Until then, I think the best way to think about the future of the humanities is to take Kaufmann's warnings about "blindness" to heart, and—to say it more time—never stop reflecting on aims and goals.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An interesting and salutary reminder of how current debates might not be as current as we think can be found in a 1930 essay by Sherlock Bronson Gass entitled "The Well of Discipline," reprinted in *Humanism and America*, ed. Norman Foerster (Farrar and Reinhardt: 1930). Speaking as a humanist, Gass worried openly about "the contrast between the fruitfulness of the scientific world, its vitality, its harmony, its worldwide cooperation, and our frankly acknowledged moral bankruptcy—vigor and fecundity into the area into which discipline has been shifted and chaos in the area in which discipline has been withdrawn." (p. 283) While Gass's understanding of "moral bankruptcy" may no longer be in perfect accord with contemporary concerns, his sense of alarm that the humanities are not proficient and adequate in the areas where they most need to be is an ongoing one, and thus one that should be addressed with an eye toward the ways it has been treated in the past.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaufmann (with a new introduction by Saul Goldwasser), *The Future of the Humanities: Teaching Art, Religion, Philosophy Literature and History* (Transaction Publishers: 1995), first published by Readers Digest Press in 1977. Henceforth, this book is referred to as "TFH."

<sup>3</sup> Naturally, the critical nature of present concerns will press for a continual discussion of the future of the humanities, and that of education in general. An especially helpful bibliographic overview of these discussions, particularly as

they relate to the future of higher education, is to be found at an Ohio State University website: <http://humanities.osu.edu/news/forums/spring03/bibliography.cfm>. In the Spring of 2003, OSU sponsored a forum on the future of the public research university. The useful “readings of interest” they provide underscore the importance of inquiring into the ends of humanities education altogether.

<sup>4</sup> For the “art of reading,” see pages 47-83 in *TFH*.

<sup>5</sup> See Graff’s 1992 *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts can Revitalize American Education* (Norton: 1992) and his 2003, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (Yale University Press: 2003).

<sup>6</sup> *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann (Viking Books: 1954). In all, Kaufmann translated and commented on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Genealogy of Morals*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Gay Science*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, *The Antichrist*, *Ecce Homo*, and the posthumous notes titled, *The Will to Power*.

<sup>7</sup> *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton University Press: 1950, 1956, 1968, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (World Publishing Company: 1956, expanded edition, New American Library: 1975).

<sup>9</sup> *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Anchor Books: 1958) and *The Faith of a Heretic* (first published, 1959, 1060, 1961, Meridian Edition: 1975).

<sup>10</sup> *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Doubleday: 1968) and *Religions in Four Dimensions* (Reader’s Digest Press: 1975).

<sup>11</sup> Although German-Jewish intellectual migration to America is an enormously important topic, much of its impact remains to be explored. For information on the general phenomenon, see *The Muses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation, 1930-1945*, Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden, eds. (Smithsonian Institution Press: 1983).

<sup>12</sup> This can be seen in a website about Kaufmann hosted by Andrew Spear: <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~adspear/Kaufmann%20entrance.htm>. Spear provides a full listing of Kaufmann’s writings and reaches a wide variety of readers, academics and non-academics alike. There are not many published studies of Kaufmann’s works, though this is changing. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen of the University of Miami has a forthcoming article on Kaufmann, “Dionysian Enlightenment.”

<sup>13</sup> See the *Symposium*, 216a.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, p. 10. This point is amplified in several other places in Kaufmann’s writing. See, especially, his *The Faith of a Heretic* (1959, 1961). These books combine an anti-authoritarianism with a deep respect for tradition. This lays the foundation for the notion Kaufmann developed in *The Future of the Humanities* that instructors do not need to claim an air of infallibility in order to help students identify errors in the past.

<sup>15</sup> *TFH*, p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> *TFH*, p. xxix

<sup>17</sup> Page Smith’s *Killing the Spirit* (Viking: 1990) makes some of the same

points, albeit for somewhat different reasons. It is interesting to compare these two works as pendant volumes.

<sup>18</sup> The point is made directly on *TFH*, p. 47, “Reading is the core of the humanities and social sciences, but most students never learn to read well.” It is interesting to read these comments in conjunction with what Robert M. Hutchins had said earlier in his *Great Books: The Foundation of a Liberal Education* (Simon and Schuster: 1954).

<sup>19</sup> *TFH*, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> *TFH*, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> In his *Discovering the Mind, Volume One: Goethe, Kant and Hegel* (Transaction: 1991, first published 1980), Kaufmann went as far as to argue that even an undeniably great philosopher like Kant could advance hypotheses that were a “disaster” (p. 5) when it came to advancing human self-knowledge. A separate discussion would be required to grasp why he said this, but it helps bring out the point that Kaufmann did not presume that taking up the most forbidding ideas of a well-regarded writer was, in and of itself, the royal road to good pedagogy.

<sup>22</sup> *TFH*, p. 48. For a specific illustration of why Kaufmann felt this was the wrong approach, see the critique of Heidegger in *Discovering the Mind, Volume Two: Nietzsche, Heidegger and Buber* (Transaction: 1991, first published 1980), especially p. 195-97.

<sup>23</sup> *TFH*, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> *TFH*, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> *TFH*, p. 58. The notion of a “You” in a text may remind American readers of Martin Buber. Yet the claim that knowledge—particularly knowledge in the humanities—required a kind of empathy that “re-constructed” the thoughts of others was well established in the German intellectual tradition. A important figure in this respect, and an author with whom Buber and Kaufmann were familiar was Wilhem Dilthey (1833-1991). His *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* has been translated into English as *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Princeton: 1985), ed. Rudolph A. Makkrel and Frithjof Rodi. Even if one disagrees with some of Dilthey’s main contentions, more familiarity with this work would enrich the debate of the humanities in the US.

<sup>26</sup> Without question, one of the abiding concerns of twentieth-century literary criticism has been the effort to demonstrate the ostensible naiveté of presuming unproblematic “given meanings in the interpretation of texts. For a now standard work in this regard see Stanley Fish’s *Is there a Text in this Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard: 1980). Kaufmann, for his part, never spoke of timeless and pre-discursively given meanings. Rather, his concern was that, in the search for meaning, people did not abandon what Nietzsche called “the intellectual conscience” or the careful reflection on objection and alternate arguments.

<sup>27</sup> *TFH*, p. 165.

<sup>28</sup> *TFH*, p. 165.

<sup>29</sup> *TFH*, p. 166.

<sup>30</sup> *TFH*, p. 167.



<sup>31</sup> An interesting “macro” overview of the events Kaufmann describes is found in Bruce A.

<sup>32</sup> Kimball’s *Orators and Philosophers: History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (College Entrance Examination Board: 1995). Much of Kaufmann’s account is commensurate with what Kimball reports, though Kimball sees the roots of specialization beginning in pre World War II days. *TFH*, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup> Kaufmann’s praise of self-discipline is best understood in light of his appropriation of Nietzsche. On p. 162 of *TFH*, he wrote that, “without self-discipline there is no mastery of any kind, nor autonomy, nor creativity that keeps on yielding satisfaction. Self-discipline is not enough, but those who lack it head for slavery or despair, or both.” Despite the notion, popular in some quarters, that Nietzsche preached a wild liberation from all restraint, in his own work on Nietzsche, Kaufmann emphasized Nietzsche’s arguments in favor of self-mastery, and his conviction that self-overcoming is the precondition for all educational progress. Along these lines, the one specific recommendation Kaufmann made for pre-college education is to point out that “children will soon cease to get much satisfaction from their work if they do not feel that they are making progress and can point to an occasional triumph.” (p. 162) Turning everything into progress and triumph and treating that as the only possible outcome undermines education. To see how this follows from Kaufmann’s understanding of Nietzsche see p. 216 of his short essay “How Nietzsche Revolutionized Ethics” reprinted in *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Princeton: 1979, first published 1959).

<sup>34</sup> Kaufmann’s student, Ivan Soll, argued that though Kaufmann did not live to see the predominance of postmodernism in certain sectors of academia, what he has to say about the abandonment of meaning as an intellectual idea remains relevant today. See Soll’s introduction to *Discovering the Mind, Volume Two: Nietzsche, Heidegger and Buber* (Transaction: 1991, first published 1980).

<sup>35</sup> Introduction, *TFH*, p. xxi.

<sup>36</sup> *TFH*, p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> For a full outline of the course, see *TFH*, p. 134-36.