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WHAT DOES WALTER KAUFMANN'S HEIDEGGER CRITIQUE HAVE TO OFFER THE 21ST CENTURY?

Abstract. Heidegger has many critics, but not all critics are alike. This paper analyses the work of one of the more forceful and provocative of Heidegger's detractors, Walter Kaufmann (1921–1980). The paper argues that Kaufmann's criticisms of Heidegger deserve analysis in their own right. To make this case it unpacks Kaufmann's biographical and scholarly involvement with Heidegger, explaining how Kaufmann (a refugee from Germany) was instrumental in bringing Heidegger to the attention of the American academic public. At the same time, the paper argues that Kaufmann's intense opposition to Heidegger's thought comes from his equally strong engagement with issues that preoccupied Heidegger as well. Specifically, Kaufmann's own search to find a more honest and meaningful way to speaking about existential questions caused him to recoil from what he saw as Heidegger's efforts to deflect, rather than spark, thought and engagement. The logic of Kaufman's argument, as well as the implications of his criticisms of Heidegger are explored in the essay.

Keywords: Heidegger; Kaufmann, Walter; existentialism; hermeneutics; self-deception

I

I want to argue for the enduring value of the work of one Heidegger's sharpest detractors, Walter Kaufmann (1921–1980), as he was one of the first English-speaking philosophers to criticize Heidegger not be-

cause he deviated from Anglo-American positivistic traditions, but because he did not realize the philosophical goals of the Continental-hermeneutic horizon. Hence, Kaufmann is interesting from the standpoint of intellectual history, but the matter goes beyond issues of priority. What Kaufmann said in the 20th century has wider relevance for the 21st. Kaufmann's Heidegger critique has never received the attention it deserves, making it all the more desirable to show that his points still resonate, not only for what he found questionable in Heidegger and his reputation, but also for the implications his broader goals have for interpretive inquiry in the current age.

In taking up the timeliness of what Kaufmann has to say, we should keep in mind Heidegger's own point that "knowledge does not exist like books or stones."¹ Raising a question like "why should Kaufmann be remembered?" is also a challenge to explore our general relationship to Heidegger. Apart from a circle of devotees, Heidegger almost always comes in for some degree of criticism, often excoriating, particularly when his politics are concerned. Thus, while it is not necessary to repeat what is well-known, it is worthwhile to think about what is actually being valued when Heidegger is celebrated as being a great, if flawed, philosopher. He is praised this way a great deal, and he also is credited with marking some kind of new beginning in thinking. But in what, exactly, does Heidegger's greatness consist? It is not difficult to find statements, like this one, chosen practically at random, from Henri F. Ellenberger. He said that *Being and Time* was a "thoroughly new and original analysis of the structure of human existence."² But what did this analysis, or the work of the "late" Heidegger actually accomplish? Rather than begging the question of speaking of breaks in traditions in metaphysics, or uncoverings of truth, it seems to me that we can suggest that the reason these reputed achievements are seen as appealing is because they are enlisted in a quest to find answers to the

¹ M. Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. T. Sadler, Continuum, London–New York 2004, 113.

² H. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, Basic Books, New York 1970, 850.

ills of modernity, especially the feeling that the most subtle – yet most vital – aspects of human life are being suffocated or lost. Heidegger, when praised, is done so because he is understood as capable of putting us in touch with what really matters.³

This is why Kaufmann really matters. He stands within this horizon of concern, and to put it less portentously, some of the ends most meaningful to Heidegger were also meaningful to him. To say that Kaufmann incorporated some of Heidegger's most valuable concerns into his own critique would be misleading, since such broadly existentialist ideas were in the air as Kaufmann wrote. But if we look at Kaufmann's wider writings – for instance, he was also a poet – we see a family resemblance in what was attempted philosophically. Thus, Kaufmann also decried:

“The age of the onion
thought and feeling run thin
the time of technique
the age of the skin.”⁴

Likewise, with Heidegger, he concerned himself with moments of resolution. In a poem called *Who Cares?* he concluded:

“we must choose. Who cares for our fate?
A few nights and one disappears.
Yet our choices gain weight
as they grow in the mind through the years.”⁵

However, when it came to the large matter before us, Kaufmann also concluded that there are “no great merits to offset what is wrong with

³ The praise of Heidegger made by international figures in Zagreb, Japan, and Venezuela, in the following documentary are illustrative: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3zOK7U6sAc&feature=mr_meh&list=PLAE517627D6FB72B7&playnext=0

⁴ W. Kaufmann, *The Core*, in: *Cain and Other Poems*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 1962, 69.

⁵ W. Kaufmann, *Who Cares*, in: *Cain and Other Poems*, op. cit., 73.

Heidegger's thought"?⁶ And revealingly for what is to come, he began his poem *The Core* with:

“What is hard
to follow
often hides lard
or is hollow.”⁷

What accounts for not only the nature, but the intensity of this stance? Answering this question will be our way of ascertaining what Kaufmann's Heidegger critique still has to offer. The first step is to put Kaufmann's relationship to Heidegger in the context of intellectual history.

II

Kaufmann's involvement with Heidegger came at a moment of the wildly successful importation of existentialism into American intellectual life, along with the even more influential – because less noticed – notion that the humanities needs a leavening of “theory” from Continental thinkers. Before the mid-20th century, neither existentialism nor the mix of ideas and iconic authors that came to be known as critical theory had much traction in America. The intellectual historian of Nietzsche's reception in the USA, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, characterized fundamental attitudes just prior to this sea-change in American intellectual life: “As Anglo-American philosophy increasingly emulated the sciences, philosophy on the European continent was extending its reach, employing literary, artistic and psychological discourses to examine the experience of modern man. Continental thinkers continued to examine the full range of human experience – individual identity, modern anxiety, and longing for transcendence – in order to draw a more complete picture of man. However, because of this broadly humanistic scope, the ideas of Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre

⁶ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, vol. 2: *Nietzsche, Heidegger and Buber*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1980, 233. Unless noted, all references to *Discovering the Mind* are to vol. 2.

⁷ W. Kaufmann, *The Core*, op. cit., 69.

were deemed insufficiently 'philosophical' for serious study in most American philosophy departments."⁸

In the 21st century the situation is noticeably different. American philosophy departments may (sometimes) still favor pragmatic and analytic traditions, but it is normal for any number of departments to look to European theorists to take up the "broadly humanistic scope" bequeathed by existentialism. Moreover, even if only vanishingly few readers actually read their thick, jargon-laden tomes, Continental philosophers are granted world-wide reputations as important philosophers. Heidegger, especially, has "arrived," in Germany and America and many more countries.

Interestingly enough, Kaufmann, who expended so much effort to dispute Heidegger's reputation, also played a major role in bringing him to the attention of American readers, and in linking his name to ranks of major philosophers. The reasons for this are not paradoxical or unintentional. Kaufmann first taught Heidegger to students at Princeton University in the early 1950's.⁹ He went on to provide a major service in helping Heidegger become and remain famous by assigning him a prominent place in his extremely popular anthology, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. This book, especially in its paperback version, became the key medium by which existentialist texts were distributed to English-speaking readers. A noted historian of the subject, George Cotkin, wrote in his *Existential America* that Kaufmann's anthology became a necessary possession of American university students. Whether or not this is true, the book which first appeared in 1956 and then was expanded in 1975, went through edition after edition, and is still in print as of 2012.¹⁰ Kaufmann clearly thought that existen-

⁸ J. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and his Ideas*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012, 238.

⁹ Frithjof Bergmann, who studied with Kaufmann, told me this in a conversation in 2002.

¹⁰ In an earlier essay I went as far to suggest that Kaufmann edited the most popular philosophical anthology of all time. Even if this turns out to be not entirely true, or true only up until a certain time period, it needs to be emphasized that very few books on philosophy reach so many people. D. Pickus, *Paperback Authenticity: Walter Kaufmann and Existentialism*, *Philosophy and Literature* 34(2010)1, 17–31.

tialism was important. And since – disputes about the meaning of the term aside – Heidegger clearly was major player in what the academic public associated with existentialism, Kaufmann seems to have wanted to ensure that Americans were exposed to Heidegger fully.

In fact, Kaufmann gave Heidegger prominent place in his anthology. Nestled between Jaspers and Sartre, Kaufmann included two important essays by Heidegger, the 1929 *What is Metaphysics*, and the 1949 introduction to it *The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics*, which, as Kaufmann points out, is not only “a self-contained” essay, but one that Heidegger attached the “utmost importance,” and that “he himself selected it for inclusion” in the anthology.¹¹ Furthermore, Kaufmann himself attached importance to Heidegger’s request. He translated the latter essay personally, and went took measures to ensure fidelity in rendering, saying that “Heidegger answered questions, orally and in writing, about the translation of key terms and particularly difficult passages.”¹² In short, Kaufmann wanted readers to have access to Heidegger, and while he is hardly the only one who wrote on and translated Heidegger he is someone who helped solidly link Heidegger’s name to that elusive, but vital, conviction that there are some movements in modern philosophy that can put you in touch with what truly matters.

Certainly, it does not take much reading in Kaufmann to discern that his own stance toward Heidegger – and the very reputation that he raised up – is highly critical, and that once Kaufmann stepped out of his editorial role he intended to treat high claims made on Heidegger’s behalf with acerbic skepticism. Thus, the second edition of the existentialism anthology included an opening section from Heidegger *My Way to Phenomenology* that can be read in two ways. First, it gave general readers more insight into the nature of Heidegger’s most unfamiliar philosophical approach. But, second, when Kaufmann wrote that it is of “exceptional interest. It is autobiographical, not at all difficult to

¹¹ *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 2nd edition, ed. W. Kaufmann, New American Library, New York 1975, 233.

¹² *Ibid.*

read, and throws a great deal of light on Heidegger”¹³ he was implying that it sheds a *negative* light on Heidegger. Such insinuation may rub defenders of Heidegger the wrong way, but even if you can tell what Kaufmann is really thinking, he did not interfere via editorial commentary with Heidegger’s texts and he presented enough of Heidegger that supporters could find material to appreciate. Kaufmann’s overall tone is best summed up in the way he aimed to demonstrate both sides of the controversy. He noted that Heidegger’s “(...) detractors see him as an obscurantist whose involved constructions with their multiple plays on words conceal a mixture of banalities and falsehoods. His admirers say that he has shown the temporality of man’s existence, that he strikes new paths by raising the question of Being, and that he is the great anti-Cartesian who has overcome the fatal bifurcation of matter and mind and the isolation of the thinking self. His critics, in turn, retort that this last feat is common to most modern philosophers and that Heidegger, unlike some of the others, achieved it only by renouncing Descartes’ rule that we must think as clearly and distinctly and the mathematicians. This, say his admirers, leads to positivism; what is wanted is a new way of thinking.”¹⁴

If Kaufmann had left it at this there might not be anything special about his own Heidegger critique. But, in other places, where he did not have to strain at the limits imposed by being an editor, he expressed his criticism of Heidegger with the aim of elaborating fully why he ranked himself among the detractors. We must turn to these writings, and there we shall see that Kaufmann, for his own reasons, was quite sincere in his wish that readers open themselves to Heidegger and his spirit. For Kaufmann, Heidegger was anything but an indifferent topic, and he evidently hoped that readers take a negative, but fully engaged, stand on him as well.

¹³ Ibid., 234.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

III

Where do we see Kaufmann's full engagement? He was a prolific author, and comments about Heidegger, none indifferent, recur throughout his writings from his first publications in the late 1940's to his all-too-early death in 1980. Most of the time, Kaufmann brings in Heidegger to make a specific point about the treatment of some other issue or thinker. But his final opinion is fully elaborated in two pieces making up an elaborate *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger. The first is a thirty page essay called *Heidegger's Castle*, which appeared in a 1959 collection of essays called *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* and a self-standing section, running a little over seventy pages, in volume two of a 1980 trilogy called *Discovering the Mind*. In this work Heidegger is contrasted unfavorably with Nietzsche and – to a lesser extent – with Martin Buber. The relevant section is called *Heidegger's Dogmatic Anthropology*. It expands on the view advanced in *Heidegger's Castle*, since the conclusions he reached there are of a piece with what he said earlier.

Kaufmann could be taken to task for repeating himself. However, we could also say that he re-doubled his efforts because he simply was not listened to. To be sure, in 1988 Denis Dutton published a favorable review of *Discovering the Mind* in his journal, *Philosophy and Literature*, but even while he endorsed some of Kaufmann's main conclusions, saying that Kaufmann was at his "debunking best" in his Heidegger chapter, he did not expound much on the method Kaufmann used to reach his conclusions, or the values undergirding his approach.¹⁵ And Dutton stands out for acknowledging Kaufmann as an intellectual predecessor. Another critic of Heidegger, the Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn, covers many points that Kaufmann did, but does not mention him.¹⁶ On the other side, among supporters of Heidegger there

¹⁵ D. Dutton, review of *Discovering the Mind*, *Philosophy and Literature* 12(1988)2, 325–326.

¹⁶ See, for example, S. Blackburn review article on Heidegger, *The New Republic*, Oct. 30, 2000, available on the internet at <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/blackburn.htm>.

is a corresponding silence. Kaufmann wanted a direct response to what he wrote, so he listed his criticisms as distinct theses. He concluded challengingly "Let those who admire Heidegger convert my theses into questions and try to answer them, one by one. I have numbered them to make that easy."¹⁷

As far as I can tell, no one has ever taken up Kaufmann this way. This is a shame, especially since Heidegger's value is so often seen as preparing modern subjects for a greater openness. At the same time, it is another opportunity to understand Kaufmann's own mentality, seeing what echo it can find in the 21st-century world. In particular, it is a change to ask why, if the matter was so settled for him, he kept returning to and elaborating on his critique of Heidegger throughout his oeuvre? A passage in the first attempt, *Heidegger's Castle* starts to clarify the reasons for Kaufmann's preoccupation: "*Heidegger's lack of vision*. That Heidegger is, for all his faults, one of the most interesting philosophers of our times, there can be no doubt. What stands between him and greatness neither the opaqueness of his style, of which it is easy to make fun, nor his temporary acceptance of Nazism, of which it is easy to make too much, but his lack of vision. After everything has been said, he really does not have much to say."¹⁸

In his subsequent, longer, treatment of 1980, Kaufmann dropped the claim that Heidegger was "one of the most interesting philosophers of our times," but he certainly was interested enough to keep writing about him. In fact, though in itself it may not yet explain much about Heidegger, it is revealing of Kaufmann's own standpoint: he wants to aim at something higher than the obvious targets, something testifying to the importance of philosophy that can be summed up as a communicable "vision."

Why did he think this way? Before we elaborate on what it means for someone to have, or not have, "something to say" a word about Kaufmann's biography is in order. For our purposes, the most salient

¹⁷ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 233.

¹⁸ W. Kaufmann, *Heidegger's Castle*, in: Idem, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Beacon Press, Boston 1959, 365.

fact about Kaufmann's life is that, Jewish, his life was saved by being allowed to immigrate to the United States in 1939, aged seventeen. As noted, he would up as professor of philosophy at Princeton, and had quite a distinguished academic career. He is best known for his work on Nietzsche, and his translations of Nietzsche into English remain gold-standards, and for many American academic, their principal source of access to Nietzsche himself. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to say that Kaufmann truly found a following. By American standards, his mentality was "central European." Yet, it was hardly the case that Kaufmann identified himself as being primarily a German, and he was deeply at odds with what he considered to be the main currents of German thought of the day, not only Heidegger.

One could say that this all makes sense, since he fits squarely into the definition of a "refugee scholar." However, his sensibility is much different from other famous refugee scholars in America, say Hannah Arendt or Herbert Marcuse. Kaufmann also tended to criticize and distance himself from figures like these. In short, when we consider Kaufmann's stance on Heidegger we should keep in mind that he did not fit in anywhere, and was not speaking on the side of any particular school. Calling him "German," "American," "Jewish," "exile" or any number of academic labels will not really help us. Yet, as individual as he was, his critique of Heidegger was not eclectic or haphazard. The complaint about "lack of vision" can be related to a coherent set of concerns, and by unpacking them we can start to get at the urgency as well.

IV

Though Kaufmann knew Heidegger personally, this interaction does not seem decisive in the charges raised, as Kaufmann suggested he had already formed an opinion and then "tried to test my image of him by going to talk with him repeatedly, by attending his lectures (1955–1956), and by translating an essay of his choice with an understanding that he would answer questions about it."¹⁹ Kaufmann did

¹⁹ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 229.

suggest that Heidegger was courteous and charming, but it is evident that his that the personal interaction did not change his mind one way or the other. What seems more decisive is that Kaufmann had different ideas on some of the exact same material that Heidegger did. To take one example of this opposition, Kaufmann sees the beginnings of philosophy in a fundamentally different way than Heidegger, saying “In fact, the Pre-Socratics themselves did not have any saving knowledge: though men of genius, they were human beings like ourselves, with some insights we lack, perhaps, but without other insights that we owe to their successors.”²⁰ Demurring so sharply from Heidegger (or the late Heidegger) goes beyond an individual point of interpretation, spilling over into a disagreement on what is at stake in interpreting philosophical texts altogether.

From which soil, to use one of Heidegger's metaphors, did this fundamental branching grow? As I see it, it is not because Kaufmann read an author, say Nietzsche or Rilke, differently than Heidegger. Nor did Kaufmann belong to another school, e.g., a non-phenomenological camp, and that caused Kaufmann to look so askance at Heidegger. Instead, I think that Kaufmann lacked faith that Heidegger paid sufficient attention to the very phenomena he claimed to discuss. To explain this, it helps not only to look at what Kaufmann said against Heidegger, but to whom he allied himself in doing so. Here, a favorable reference he gave to two the work of two literary critics Robert Minder (1902–1980), and Walter Muschg (1898–1965) is revealing. Kaufmann praised both highly, saying that “Compared to these two splendid studies most of the literature on Heidegger is simply tone deaf.”²¹ Not many readers, especially outside of Germany, know Muschg's essay *Zerschwatzte Dichtung* (*Poetry Chatted to Pieces*), or Minder's work, also in German, *Heidegger, Hebel and the Language of Messkirch*.²²

²⁰ W. Kaufmann, *Heidegger's Castle*, op. cit., 368.

²¹ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 230.

²² W. Muschg, *Zerschwatzte Dichtung*, in: *Die Zerstörung der deutschen Literatur*, Francke, Bern 1956, 93–109; R. Minder, *Heidegger, Hebel and the Language of Messkirch*, in: *Dichter in der Gesellschaft*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1966, 210–264. The translations from German are mine.

However, not only do both repay reading, but they also help clarify why some critics of Heidegger can reach a sense that Heidegger represents a false path in basic scholarship.

Beginning with Minder, his starting point is a speech that Heidegger gave on the writer of provincial German life, Johann Peter Hebel (1760–1826). Hebel was once widely popular. Tolstoy knew and loved him, but today he is little read outside of literary circles, especially as his stories and poems are set in small villages of south-west Germany and often use a dialect hard for outsiders to understand. Heidegger, whose native Messkirch is in the same area, felt an attachment to this small-town “rootedness.” In 1957 he gave a radio address that praised Hebel for devising a kind of authentic poetry in contrast to the debased speech of the present day. This meant that Heidegger promised his listeners to uncover a deeper meaning in Hebel than others can perceive should they not penetrate into the essence of his language. In responding to this Minder points out that there already is a large literature that celebrates Hebel as a hero of mystic rootedness, and that this literature is highly unattractive, irrational, anti-Semitic, and aggressively nationalistic. The question is whether by putting similar arguments in his own philosophical idiom Heidegger has propelled himself beyond this literature. Minder answers decisively no, saying that what he offers instead is a “pseudo-romantic, mystifying conception of the poet that brings us no step closer to Hebel, rather consecrates him, far from the light of day, as a priest of the world mystery.”²³ Heidegger, for Minder, distorts literature and alienates us, as it were, from the presence of a poet that he claimed could overcome alienation.

Muschg, for his part, was as exasperated or more than Minder. He concentrated on Heidegger’s treatment of the, for the German audience, even more famous poet, Hölderlin. Although Heidegger writes at length about Hölderlin, including a book of commentary devoted solely to him,²⁴ Muschg argues that Heidegger simply does not see him.

²³ R. Minder, *op. cit.*, 213.

²⁴ M. Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1951.

Instead, he elevates a fantasy figure of a “healing seer and bringer of light” and he concluded that “It is not difficult to discern that he attributes to Hölderlin the views that he expounds in his own philosophical writings.”²⁵ These views are not only at odds with what the poet said and cared about, but tedious, since Heidegger’s interpretation never sees anything beyond its own presuppositions. Muschg concludes: “Heidegger’s example shows that one can entirely misinterpret a poet using his own words, something we already knew.”²⁶

Minder and Muschg document their cases at length, and while they worked independently of each other, and it is evident that Kaufmann found confirmation of his own image of Heidegger in their essays. What Kaufmann appears to have meant by other Heidegger literature being “tone deaf” when compared to these works is that he felt these critics paid close attention to the ways that Heidegger actually treated his material. Thus, they were able to ask questions that needed to be asked of Heidegger himself, particularly if there were alternatives that indeed captured the poetic subtlety that sought, but that his very practice obviated. To give an example, in his Hebel piece Heidegger repeated, albeit in philosophical language, the arch-nativist commonplace that local dialects allow for the expression of more individuality and that a “pre-Latin” German, which Heidegger thought his interpretation of some poets revealed, allowed for the expression of otherwise inexpressible deep truths. Minder listened closely to this claim and how it was made, and thus put himself in a position where he could openly question the argument. After all, he said, Thomas Aquinas and Spinoza did not write in this kind of native language, and yet their individuality was not squelched (unless, of course, and this is what is criticized, we mis-define individuality to mean only the sort of provincial identity Heidegger wants it to be). Muschg, for his part, also paid close attention to what he called the “fluctuating and iridescent” word artistry in the poet Georg Trakl and thus was able to notice the “absolute contrast” to the “monotony” of Heidegger’s exegesis, with its tendency

²⁵ W. Muschg, *op. cit.*, 94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

toward “violent simplification and rendering everything identical.”²⁷ In sum, the conclusion of both literary critics is that the poets Heidegger treats do indeed offer ways to rise above the confining and deadening aspect of language, but not if you follow Heidegger’s exegesis. If his was the only alternative, the insights and vistas these poets offer would remain confined.

As we turn to Kaufmann we will see that his response to Heidegger was to produce an even more philosophical and wide-ranging variant on this critique. Thus, he reached similar conclusions, for instance saying “Heidegger’s readings tend to disregard all context – he prefers texts that seem to have no context, like *Nachlass* notes or fragments of the Pre Socratic philosophers – and it would be easy but pointless to pile up examples of totally arbitrary misinterpretations.”²⁸ Yet, his goals are more ambitious. He does not want only to protest against the misreading of certain kinds of poets or philosophers. He does not want merely to take issue with the way either the early or late Heidegger is treated in the history of philosophy. Indeed, he does not even want to make Heidegger’s politics an insuperable barrier to reading him. Instead, what he wanted to show was that Heidegger’s general manner of procedure was a process of shutting off and shutting down. Kaufmann began his *Heidegger’s Castle* essay with “‘Language is the house of Being,’ says Heidegger; but in truth his language is the house in which *he* hides, and his Gothic language is like a row of towers that frighten us away while it gives a feeling of security.”²⁹ The relevance of Kaufmann’s Heidegger critique for the 21st century is that the danger of turning a quest for meaning and humanity into a process of concealment and intimidation is still a burning one. To make this case further we must turn to the actual details of Kaufmann’s own critique.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 175.

²⁹ W. Kaufmann, *Heidegger’s Castle*, op. cit., 339. Italics in original.

V

Kaufmann said, “The central point in my critique of Heidegger is to show how he impeded the discovery of the mind.”³⁰ Yet, given what we have said, that cannot mean that he thought Heidegger and what he stood for could be dispensed with summarily: “The point is not that Heidegger is wholly inauthentic. In him – as in Hesse and Buber, Nietzsche and Sartre, and everyone else – authenticity and inauthenticity are curiously mixed.”³¹ Still, Kaufmann felt that the ways Heidegger approached this “curious mixture” in his philosophical writings could be shown to be demonstrably unsound. In other words, there are considerable differences in the way that one approaches self and knowledge and that Heidegger never came up with any “alternative that could replace the use of hypotheses and the patient weighing of objections and alternatives.”³² This is the heart of Kaufmann’s contribution, since the various charges he leveled against Heidegger all share the complaint that Heidegger did not submit his theories to the judgment of an intellectual conscience, and indeed sought to squelch its voice altogether.

The phrase “intellectual conscience” may sound familiar. It is how Kaufmann rendered the exact equivalent of Nietzsche’s *Das intellektuale Gewissen* into English. Kaufmann – who admired this passage from *The Gay Science* greatly – understood it primarily in the sense that Nietzsche used it, namely of not believing something “without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con.”³³ Kaufmann, without interpreting “final” and “most certain” in an extreme and scientific sense,³⁴ argues that

³⁰ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 176.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

³² *Ibid.*, 228.

³³ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. with a comm. W. Kaufmann, Random House, New York 1974.

³⁴ To see why Kaufmann did not believe that the intellectual conscience could only be served by mathematical and behaviorist explanatory models see the first volume: W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind: Goethe, Kant and Hegel*, McGraw Hill, New York 1980, 42–46, where he holds up Goethe as an exemplar of “poetic science.”

Heidegger ignored plausible objections to his claims. Indeed, it takes no great interpretive proficiency to see that Kaufmann built his case from this standpoint. He openly said that “Above all one should reread section 2 of *The Gay Science*. (...) Its theme is that ‘*the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience*.’” And he went on to quote damning lines from Nietzsche with an obvious eye on Heidegger. All this makes the argument of the previous section even easier to understand: while Minder and Muschg wanted to demonstrate the absence of intellectual conscience in respect to literature, Kaufmann wants to show its exclusion from Heidegger’s general philosophy.

Hence, what really matters is Kaufmann’s own method in demonstrating this case. Here, it is best to turn to an example, since – to use the jargon – it is a “boundary situation” where a decision must be made. Kaufmann pugnaciously welcomed such a challenge and turned to *Being and Time*, where, among other things, he criticized Heidegger’s long discussion of “Being-toward-death,” saying: “It never seems to have occurred to him to ask whether human attitudes toward death might differ (1) according to one’s age and the stage one has reached in one’s development, (2) at different stages in history and (3) in different cultures. He seems to have looked for timeless truths that are absolutely certain and his tone frequently gives the impression that he has found such truths.”³⁵

This point should be related to all the other charges Kaufmann brings. He will continue inquire into Heidegger’s existential choices, and will continue to take issue when he sees no valid engagement with alternatives.

As is easily guessed by the tenor of his comments, Kaufmann himself has published his own ideas on death, particularly in a central chapter of one of his most important books, *The Faith of a Heretic*.³⁶ There, circa 1961, he noted the popularity of existentialism, and said, “If now one simply offers one’s own ideas about death, they are likely

³⁵ Ibid., 190.

³⁶ W. Kaufmann, *Death*, in: Idem, *The Faith of a Heretic*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 1961, 353–376.

to be met with the response: why should we accept these rather than those?"³⁷ Kaufmann's method, when it came to Heidegger, is to try to demonstrate that Heidegger systematically does not ask himself such questions.

To take a more abstractly philosophical example, Kaufmann complained that the "whole enterprise" in *Being and Time* is "ill considered," since "Heidegger's 'fundamental question' about the 'meaning of Being' simply ignores Hegel's and Nietzsche's critical discussions of 'Being' and assumes that 'Being' has a meaning."³⁸ Kaufmann's point is not that Heidegger must take up the attitude of Nietzsche or Hegel (for instance, the argument in Hegel's *Logic* that pure being is to be equated with pure nothing), but rather that Heidegger's approach confines us to one untested premise. Thus, the upshot of investigating Being, as Kaufmann sees Heidegger's project, is that "in order to discover this meaning we must first lay the foundation by analyzing 'human Being' and above all the two allegedly basic modes of that: authenticity and inauthenticity."³⁹ In other words, Kaufmann will argue that Heidegger compels the reader follow a single, and not necessarily fruitful path, thereby banning the "small single questions and experiments," necessary for putting intellectual conscience in action.⁴⁰ We must see how Kaufmann made this case.

VI

As we look at the way Kaufmann made his case we must also ask if his depiction of Heidegger as being merely "wizard" and hawk of solutions to "world riddles" is fair?⁴¹ The relevant passages in Heidegger are so voluminous that it's tempting to avoid asking the question, but

³⁷ Ibid., 354.

³⁸ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 188.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The phrase "small single questions and experiments" is found Nietzsche's *Dawn of Day*, aphorism 547.

⁴¹ W. Kaufmann called Heidegger a "wizard" in *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 234.

it also is not right to avoid testing, to some extent, Kaufmann's claim that testing was avoided. In "numbered unit 11," or part one, section one, chapter one, number 11 (of the first half) of *Being and Time*, Heidegger has a section titled "The Demarcation of the Existence Analytic opposed to Anthropology, Psychology and Biology."⁴² Though the meaning of this section, like many other things in the book, subject to dispute, it does seem to be reasonable to conclude that what Heidegger meant by this particular "demarcation" is that what really matters is the "authentic philosophical problem"⁴³ which sciences cannot answer. Hence, while Heidegger gives the sciences some credit, its individual insights are downplayed in favor of what is restated as the "fundamental philosophical question," which revolves around the "ontological fundament."⁴⁴ Certainly, the context of this discussion requires wider exposition. But it is hardly the only place that Heidegger brackets away other forms of knowledge, and Kaufmann's frustration is more explicable if we consider the number of times that invocation of "ontology," or some equivalent, warded off the possibilities of considering dissenting ideas.

This leads to another, more topical, point. Heidegger's appeal today is very much bound up with the notion that he provides an alternative to "scientific" reductionism, establishing a wholly appropriate way of grasping human existence. Kaufmann's rejoinder was that even if (*pace* Dilthey) human beings cannot be understood in the same way as natural phenomena, the "consideration of objections and alternatives is as applicable to the understanding of people, actions and texts as it is in the natural science. Here, too, the best we can do is formulate hypotheses or tentative interpretations and then see what speaks for and what against them and what speaks for and against various alternatives."⁴⁵ As this repetition of the central idea shows, Kaufmann's larger aim is to argue that if you do not do this, you cannot help but repeat prejudices.

⁴² M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, M. Niemeyer, Tübingen 1963 (1927), 50–52.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 45

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁵ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, *op. cit.*, 190.

Another way Kaufmann summarized his rejection of *Being and Time* was to say that “Heidegger seems to have felt that as long as he was merely *describing* phenomena with ontological intent, he did not have to consider theories that *explain* behavior.”⁴⁶ And without explanation – in the manner Kaufmann wanted it done – Heidegger had to repeat settled convictions, which is why I used the term “prejudices.” To show this, let us continue with Kaufmann’s argument that what truly lent, and lends, *Being and Time* its attraction is not ontology, but the way that somehow buying into it leads to the unfavorable contrast between authentic and inauthentic ways of living. This contrast Kaufmann calls “shallow and Manichean,” and he adds that “The shallowness is due in no small measure to the Manichaeism.”⁴⁷

Kaufmann explained this by taking up Heidegger’s fundamental contrast between chatter, curiosity and ambiguity on the inauthentic side, and resoluteness on the authentic side. In response, Kaufmann looked directly the negative side and contradicted bluntly, saying that “these phenomena certainly do not always have to be inauthentic.”⁴⁸ He then, perhaps with his experience of the 1960’s in mind, added: “Nor need one insist conversely that the curiosity of children and adolescents who must persist in the fact of patronizing, stupid answers in order to find their way is a paradigm of authenticity. There is no need to be so dualistic. Our curiosity in the “good” sense might develop out of, or depend on, curiosity in the less edifying sense.”⁴⁹

This point may not seem weighty enough to be philosophical. But this is precisely the heart of Kaufmann’s psychological criticism. The ostensibly rigorous exegeses of abstractions distract attention from the fact that Heidegger “took his cue from a word, as usual – in this case *Neugier*, which literally means greed for what is new, and then scored against the most pathetic form of curiosity, which is a form of escape

⁴⁶ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

from oneself.”⁵⁰ In other words, Heidegger took us father from existential realities by dressing up in philosophical language commonplaces about the unattractiveness of curiosity popular in the Germany of his day. Indeed, for Kaufmann, without considering different kinds of curiosity he could do little else than repeat commonplaces. *Pars pro toto*, Kaufmann wants us to think of this example as representative of a larger problem.

VII

Given this, the next step is to specify some of the sources of these commonplaces or prejudices, all relating to Heidegger’s appropriating the ideas of others, including his own unclarified relationship to Christianity. Kaufmann treated both topics at length, but the nature of his critique can be summed up with a few examples.

First, Kaufmann argued that “Heidegger’s three categories of inauthenticity, and his characterizations of curiosity, ambiguity and chatter are all derived from Kierkegaard’s *The Present Age* (1846), which is never even mentioned in *Being and Time*.”⁵¹ And Kaufmann went on to charge that Heidegger was “unable to improve on Kierkegaard” especially since “Content with his simplistic contrast of noncommittal chatter and ambiguity here and taciturn resoluteness there, [Heidegger] never bothered to consider inauthentic commitments.”⁵² Here, Kaufmann blends his philosophical argument into a condemnation of Heidegger’s politics in the late 1920’s and early 30’s, for “He could hardly have failed to note that many of his students were even then weighing religious and political commitments that would integrate their lives and personalities, providing that ‘wholeness’ of which he made so much. Yet he had nothing to say about what I call the pathology of commitment.”⁵³ This is what Kaufmann most wanted us to think about in refe-

⁵⁰ Ibid., 200.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 201.

⁵³ Ibid., 202.

rence to Heidegger and Nazism, and he quoted from Heidegger's 1933 address "The Self-Assertion of the German Universities," showing that no apologetics could deny Heidegger's expressions of contempt for academic freedom or professions of enthusiasm for Hitler. Yet, what really interested Kaufmann is not the opinions in themselves. A writer, say Dostoevsky, could have some repellent opinions and still be an undeniable genius. Rather, Kaufmann challenged someone who considers such opinions "irrelevant from a philosophical point of view ought to show us how the supposedly serious contributions [of Heidegger] differ from these irresponsible publications. *In method*, I claim, they are no different."⁵⁴ In short, uncritical glorifications of commitment were fashionable in the early part of Heidegger's career, and Heidegger's basic method culminated in the repetition of the fashionable. As Kaufmann summed up: "He was anything but a loner."⁵⁵

This leads to a final point about theology and Christianity. For Kaufmann, had Heidegger said openly that he was a Christian theologian, and that he hoped to speak with the authority of theologians as in days of old, then Kaufmann would have little to say. But his objection is that the appeal Heidegger makes is covert. Applying this point, Kaufmann said "Many of Heidegger's statements about Being that are puzzling at first glance become clearer when we realize that Heidegger substitutes "Being" where theologians say "God."⁵⁶ Yet, the actual engagement with theological traditions is deflected and instead, when we turn to the specific subjects that concerned Heidegger most, Kaufmann said we see that "Heidegger secularized Christian preaching about guilt, dread and death, but claimed to break with two thousand years of Western thought." To show this Kaufmann took the example of Heidegger's treatment of "*Todesangst*, mortal dread, or dread in the face of death." He noted that in the Germany of Heidegger's time the notion that "all

⁵⁴ Ibid., 228. Italics in original. The sentence is in plural because Kaufmann was making the same point about Max Scheler as his did about Heidegger. Scheler had also written a book chauvinistically defending Germany's war aims in the First World War.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁶ W. Kaufmann, *Heidegger's Castle*, op. cit., 363.

men feel dread in the face of death was a commonplace.”⁵⁷ Kaufmann then says: “Now one might expect that a philosopher who devoted so much of the second half of his *magnum opus* to this dread would inquire whether this popular view was well founded. One might suppose that he would ask whether it is a feature of our time that is perhaps historically conditioned – specifically by Christianity, which for many centuries tried to imbue men with dread in the face of death.”⁵⁸

After asserting that this acknowledged adherence to tradition prevented Heidegger from considering alternatives to dread in the face of death (he mentions the views of Socrates, the Stoics, and David Hume as non-Christian options), Kaufmann said that Heidegger’s “treatment of death (...) came straight out of Tolstoy’s great story *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*.” As the adjective reveals, this story happens to be one that Kaufmann truly admires. Nevertheless, he added, “But for all that, Tolstoy’s magnificent variation on the old Christian theme of a deathbed conversion does not entitle us to generalize that ‘Being toward death is essentially dread’ and that authenticity requires a dread of death.”⁵⁹

Kaufmann summed up his case this way: “Even those who accept Christian teaching might well be bothered by two points. First, Heidegger does not add to our understanding of the phenomena discussed and he covered up central problems. Secondly, Heidegger never admitted that he was rejecting Nietzsche and Freud to go back to Christian ideas. (...) Rarely has a famous philosopher misunderstood so thoroughly what he was doing – and been believed so widely.”⁶⁰ The reference to Nietzsche and Freud concerns specific arguments Heidegger made about death and inauthenticity, but the wider issue is that Heidegger obviates a genuine encounter with the confessional traditions. Either one can a) define oneself openly in relationship to confessional authority, or b) reject or shy away from this tradition. But to do neither, as Kaufmann claims Heidegger does, invariably results in the repetition

⁵⁷ W. Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind*, op. cit., 212.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 213.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 214.

of prejudices and the self-deception that comes from impeded understanding.

Since this is such a severe judgment, it is important to note that Kaufmann did more than insinuate it. He directly asserted that Heidegger repeated commonplaces and that he acquired followers because they needed someone to say them as received truths: "Did Heidegger really fail altogether to provide evidence for his apodictic statements? In a way, he did rely on evidence: the evidence of what 'everybody knows,' or what Heidegger himself calls 'hearsay.' As he put it in his definition of 'chatter' (...) he was 'passing on and repeating what had been said.' (...) The matter is so because one says so."⁶¹

Why would people like this? Kaufmann's answer: "A reviewer once said of another 'existentialist' who admired Heidegger: 'He says a hundred things I have been unconsciously hoping to hear from someone who assert them with authority.' This is what a great many readers of *Being and Time* have felt ever since the book appeared in 1927; and the book invited this response. Emphatically, this was not the response Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud invited."⁶²

With this note of *mundus vult decipi* we come full circle to the point about impeding the discovery of the mind: Heidegger only offers the appearance, rather than the reality of doing this. By way of conclusion I want to spend a few words defending the accuracy and relevance of Kaufmann's case.

VIII

In terms of accuracy, Kaufmann valuably expands on Minder and Mutschg by directing discussion into the realm of specific questions about Heidegger's treatment of death, resolution, authenticity, the history of philosophy, and so forth. In every case, Kaufmann's method and conclusions bans arid preoccupation with words and labels, requiring a direct engagement Heidegger's own conceptions of what is urgent and

⁶¹ Ibid., 213.

⁶² Ibid., 195.

momentous. Looking over Kaufmann's charges, I did not see any that I found inaccurate or unsubstantiated. It could be that I identified too closely with Kaufmann's stance, but one of the most attractive things about Kaufmann's critique is that he invited Heidegger supporters to make particular rejoinders to his specific points. Indeed, he seemed to hope for that, and it would be very good if they took him up. As noted, he has not yet received a response.

Still, there might be a sense that such a response is unnecessary, especially if you feel you've already taken a critical stance on Heidegger. Yet Kaufmann's points did not reproduce commonalities and they cannot be summed up in a single formula. Rather, we had to take the trouble of getting to know Kaufmann's own mind in order to see the logic and meaning of his critique. Having come this far, I want to defend the notion that getting to know Kaufmann's hermeneutic stance is time well spent. To make this case, I want to conclude with the following four points:

First, Kaufmann's critique "out existential-ed" the existentialists by taking on a concern with life-defining questions. Kaufmann himself wanted to talk about the same issues that Heidegger raised: attitudes toward death; the pull of the crowd; the liberating power of thought, and so forth. Yet for Kaufmann, the approach taken by Heidegger himself obstructed the encounter and filtered it through a discussion of concepts and philosophical schools. I believe this criticism was the reason Kaufmann put *My Way to Phenomenology* which he called a "late essay of exceptional interest"⁶³ into his existentialism anthology. For while it shows Heidegger's longing to go beyond the language of phenomenology to get at the "matter of thinking whose manifestations remain a mystery"⁶⁴ it also shows how Heidegger, despite what he otherwise taught, conceived of his career in terms of responding to issues set by schools and that even his philosophical work was conceived and published according to the needs of institutions and schools. This, in

⁶³ M. Heidegger, *My Way to Phenomenology*, in: *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, op. cit., 234.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

itself, does not confirm any of Kaufmann's specific criticisms, but it does make the first point about their wider relevance. Kaufmann wanted his criticisms to prevent the important topics raised by Heidegger from being covered over by disputes over words. The need for this kind of "recalling to purpose" is ever present, and Kaufmann's strictures do not stop with Heidegger, but give guidance on how *not* to proceed in the present age.

Second, Kaufmann related literature to philosophy in a manner that serves as a productive exemplar for subsequent inquiry. "Literature" here is broadly defined to mean imaginative writing and also the ways a philosophical author conveys style and presence. Kaufmann's unfavorable comparisons of Heidegger to Nietzsche and Freud are also "literary" in the sense that he wished to show that there is a relationship between the fact that Heidegger differed not only in idea content, but matters of style. This is not simply a matter of happening to favor Nietzsche over, say, Husserl. Kaufmann did not insist that reader accept all his other allegiances as part of his critique of Heidegger. Rather, he ask that the reader know Heidegger's mind by relating it to different styles of writing, deciding in which sorts of literature Heidegger, and philosophical opponents, find their "ground" and "home." This has direct practical applications, especially for the spread of Heidegger studies abroad. Foreign authors, not just in America, should read the authors Heidegger most closely associated himself with: Hölderlin, Rilke, certainly the ancient Greeks, preferably in the original, and decide for themselves which school of interpretation Heidegger most closely associates himself with. As they should decide with which schools of interpretation opposing authors most closely associated themselves. Moreover, this is not simply a matter of categorizing. The purpose of this relating is to compare what Heidegger made of most significant sources with the use made by others. From such a comparison Kaufmann could build his critique, one that flowed into his existential concerns and disciplined their exposition. His model can be fruitfully applied to the literature surrounding other authors as well.

Third, Kaufmann also asked for religion's yes to be yes, and no to be no. In other words, while his criticism of Heidegger took issue with

his religiosity, and associated itself with non-believing writers, Kaufmann's critique is more hostile to a deflected or obscured religiosity than straightforward religious traditions. The wider implication of his objection to Heidegger's use of Christian ideas is that it is better to state and defend traditional doctrine openly, then to "smuggle" it into a perhaps more imposing or palatable form, but one that satisfies neither the requirements of traditional faith, nor the demands of a critical, non-devotional audience. The warning against this sort of compromise remains timely today.

Fourth, and finally, Kaufmann's criticisms of Heidegger show why discussion of this sort must incorporate reflection on self-deception in both author and audience. Because this point is the most confrontational it is best to return to Kaufmann's own words, giving a last taste of his style and character. Questioning some of Heidegger's "general truths about Being," Kaufmann said that he was not "quickly refuted with a list of fatal counter-instances because he put things in such outrageous language that reactions to his prose have in the main belonged to one of four types."⁶⁵ The first type involves no self-deception, as those people simply did not read him. However, the others, beginning with the second type read him a little, found him extremely difficult, and took it for granted that the fault was one's own, and that, of course, there must be more to his assertions than he seemed to say, especially since he himself says frequently that they are truths not about man but about Being.

This contrasts with readers of third type, who read him, found him difficult, persevered, spent years studying him – and what else can one do after years of study of that sort? – became a teacher of philosophy, protecting one's investment by "explaining" Heidegger.⁶⁶

This, in turn, contrasts with a fourth type who "has not read Heidegger at all but heard about him and his influence and assumes that there must be a great deal to him." Then Kaufmann adds a final and central point: Perhaps one has penetrated to the point of recognizing

⁶⁵ W. Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic*, op. cit., 359.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

that [Heidegger] alludes to some genuine experiences – such as our utter loneliness in this world – and this is taken to show that there is more to Heidegger than those admit who shrug him off as writing merely “nonsense.” But not everybody who does not write bare nonsense is original, illuminating, or deep.⁶⁷

The suggestion, or accusation, is that all these positions require self-deception, of not wanting to know what could be known had sufficient effort been made. Since what will remain among defenders of Heidegger's reputation, whether “heavily invested” or casually supportive, is this concern with human being (with a small “b”). That is, the concern with the Heidegger who has something to say about loneliness and other existential themes will remain. Even if one comes to doubt the enduring value of his version of phenomenology; even if he gains no genuine assent when he writes “That which phenomenological investigations rediscovered as the supporting attitude of thought proves to be the fundamental trait of Greek thinking, if not indeed of philosophy as such,”⁶⁸ Heidegger will still attract attention as someone who speaks to the human condition. Kaufmann asks compellingly if there is an element of self-deception in this. This important question endures, and is hopefully on the way to receiving an answer.

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⁶⁷ Ibid., 360.

⁶⁸ M. Heidegger, *My Way to Phenomenology*, op. cit., 239.

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