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Portrait of a Heretic: The Development of Walter Kaufmann's Philosophy of Religion

By

Duncan Gale

Claremont Graduate University

2020

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## **Approval of the Dissertation Committee**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Duncan Gale as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion.

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## **Abstract**

Portrait of a Heretic: The Development of Walter Kaufmann's Philosophy of Religion

By  
Duncan Gale

This is a study of the philosophy of religion of Walter Kaufmann, specifically how he found his unique philosophical voice during the first decade of his career. It begins with Kaufmann's work as a translator and commentator on Friedrich Nietzsche, examining the ways his interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy both informs and anticipates his own philosophical perspective. Attention is also given to Kaufmann's work on Hegel and existentialism as it relates to his development. After these considerations, Kaufmann's first original work of philosophy, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, is examined in detail, beginning with his appraisal of the field of philosophy at the time he is writing and what he sees as the many conceptual confusions that have occurred throughout its history regarding the way in which religion has been treated. These include the problem of establishing an adequate philosophical definition of religion, the strained relationship between religion and truth, the confused discourse around the idea of God, and the inherently problematic nature of the discipline of theology. These initial issues are developed and elaborated upon in the discussion of Kaufmann's next major work, *The Faith of a Heretic*, which also examines Kaufmann's comparative analysis of the merits of the Old and New Testaments, specifically how they address the problem of suffering and their respective ethics and worldviews. Finally, some attention is given to Kaufmann's attempts to construct his own heretical ethic and tragic worldview. The ultimate goal of this study is to demonstrate that Kaufmann is a unique and interesting philosopher in his own right who deserves a place in the canon of the philosophy of religion because of his unusual approach that combines skepticism and sympathy towards religion.

## **Acknowledgements**

Writing a dissertation is ultimately a lonely and solitary affair, but there are a number of people who were instrumental in helping me complete it. First and foremost, my thanks to Ingolf Dalferth, who has been a truly inspiring mentor throughout my time at Claremont. I am incredibly grateful to have had the chance to work with him. My thanks also to Patricia Easton for her always helpful and encouraging guidance and feedback. Taking her classes on Hume and Kant was a highlight of my graduate school experience. I would also like to thank Randy Ramal for coming in at the eleventh hour to serve as the third member of my committee. His oftentimes pointed but always fair comments and feedback were also quite helpful. Finally, my thanks to Anselm Min, who was unfortunately unable to serve on my committee but still has been a formative influence on my academic development at Claremont. If the sections on Hegel and Aquinas in this dissertation pass muster, I have him to thank for it.

There are a couple of other people in my life who have had a decisive impact on my ability to complete this, whether they know it or not. Jay Martin, thank you for reading over parts of this and reminding me that I am fully capable of writing quality academic work. Saadullah Bashir and Brianna Donaldson, you are two great friends who helped me to rekindle my love of Walter Kaufmann, and I thank you for cheering me on all the way. Jennings Davis, my dear friend since high school, thank you for reading over parts of this and giving me such overwhelmingly positive feedback, it kept me going for a while.

Finally, I would like to thank the three most important people in my life. My parents, Tom and Marilyn Gale, thank you for your truly unconditional love and support, everything that is great in me comes from you. And Ronique Bean, my partner in life, I love you and can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you. You helped me through this most of all.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Finding One’s Voice - Kaufmann the Commentator .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Nietzsche: A Simply Dreadful Topic?.....	7
Demolishing the Legend.....	9
Kaufmann’s Biographical Approach to Nietzsche .....	14
Kaufmann’s Construction of a Unified Nietzschean Vision.....	19
Methodology .....	19
The Death of God and the Revaluation.....	23
The Will to Power.....	30
The Overman and Eternal Recurrence .....	38
Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity .....	42
Kaufmann’s Place within Nietzsche Scholarship.....	48
“The Walter Kaufmann Myth” .....	51
Kaufmann and Karl Jaspers.....	58
Kaufmann Contra Nietzsche .....	66
Kaufmann on Hegel.....	68
Kaufmann on Existentialism.....	80
<b>Chapter 2: Developing One’s Voice - Kaufmann the Critic.....</b>	<b>91</b>
Kaufmann’s View of Philosophy .....	93
Kaufmann’s Theory of Truth, or Lack Thereof.....	96
The Problem of Defining Religion .....	101
Religion and Truth.....	104
Subjective Truth and Wishful Thinking – Kaufmann On Kierkegaard and William James.....	106
Different Kinds of Religious Propositions and Evidence .....	114
The Problem of the God of the Philosophers .....	119
Ambiguity and God .....	133
Kaufmann’s Engagement with Modern Theology .....	138

**Chapter 3: Shouting to the Heavens – Kaufmann the Heretic ..... 158**

Heretic or Antichrist? ..... 159

“I am just looking for an honest man.” ..... 165

The Attack on Theology Renewed ..... 169

The Problem of Suffering ..... 177

The Book of Job ..... 183

The Distinctive Ethic of the Old Testament..... 189

Kaufmann on Jesus and his Interpreters ..... 197

Kaufmann’s Heretical Ethic ..... 209

Kaufmann’s Tragic Worldview ..... 215

Critical Appraisal of The Faith of a Heretic..... 218

**Conclusion..... 223**



## Introduction

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel observes, “What is familiar and well known as such is not really known for the very reason that it is *familiar and well known*.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the many things to which this observation could undoubtedly apply, one of them is Walter Kaufmann. He is a familiar and well-known figure within the field of philosophy, but few people are aware of the true extent of his output and expertise. The following study is meant as a contribution to what I hope will one day be an extensive secondary literature on the philosophy of Kaufmann himself. It is also meant as an explanation and defense of why Kaufmann deserves a more prominent role in the canon of the philosophy of religion.

The reasons for Kaufmann’s canonical status shall become apparent in the pages that follow, but I will provide a preliminary explanation here. The field of the philosophy of religion is unique in that it is a combination of two areas that have historically been at odds with one another, at least in the West. This enmity has at times been especially pronounced within the Christian tradition, and was best encapsulated in that well-known and presumably rhetorical question of the great Church Father Tertullian, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Despite efforts to bridge the gap between these two disciplines, the divide remains, and in the early twenty-first century we continue to be faced with a situation in which philosophers of religion generally fall into one of two broad categories – those who are philosophizing from within a tradition, and are therefore using philosophy as an apologetic tool vis à vis religion, and those who are philosophizing from outside of any tradition, and are therefore using philosophy to critique religion. I believe that Kaufmann is an important and rare representative of a middle way

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<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 20.

that uses philosophy to both critique and celebrate religion. This may not be the most conventional way to read him since his critical tendencies are far more obvious and pronounced, but I think that it is impossible to fully understand and appreciate his critiques unless one recognizes that they are always balanced with a unique “existential respect” for his interlocutors as fellow explorers of the human condition. That kind of respect always recognizes this connection as far outweighing any intellectual disagreements.

This humanistic strand in Kaufmann’s work is a crucial aspect of his contribution to the field of the philosophy of religion. If one glances at the table of contents of just about any textbook or anthology of readings in the philosophy of religion one will find all of the normal subject headings – arguments for the existence of God, the problem of evil, faith versus knowledge, the relation of religion to morality. These are no doubt important topics for those of us within the field, and yet many of us would also like to believe that there is still so much more to be discovered. What I find so exciting about Kaufmann’s work, and what I hope to convey to the reader, is that he gives us a glimpse of what some of these unexplored avenues might be. He does this by going back to all of those aforementioned topics and discovering them anew by reconnecting us with the existential concerns that motivated them in the first place. He reminds us that arguments that prove the existence of God are really just demonstrations of the quixotic efforts of human beings to apply reason and logic where they have little to no relevance, and that attempts to explain the problem of evil are *prima facie* unacceptable to those who have truly experienced the weird complexities of life on this planet. The *sui generis* nature of Kaufmann as a philosopher makes it difficult to delineate a “tradition” that he represents, but if there is one it also would include certain aspects of the thought of William James, as well as Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher who highlights the “tragic sense of life.”

How do most people know Walter Kaufmann (1921 – 1980)? Probably as a translator, and perhaps as an editor and a commentator as well. He is responsible for compiling an anthology of Nietzsche’s writings as well as an anthology of the writings of existentialist philosophers, both of which continue to be bestsellers since they first appeared in the 1950’s.<sup>2</sup> He also wrote a well-known study of Nietzsche and his name can be found as an editor of many other works used in philosophical pedagogy. Yet these facts alone do not add up to a figure who is necessarily worthy of study in his own right. What is less well known are his own original works of philosophy, such as *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (1958) and *The Faith of a Heretic* (1961). In these works, a unique voice can be heard of a man struggling with the philosophers and theologians he has studied and wanting to go beyond them to create his own unique version of the philosophy of religion. This study will trace that development through the first phase of Kaufmann’s career.

In the first chapter, I will address the work of Kaufmann as a commentator on the work of other philosophers. This includes not just his work on Nietzsche but also his lesser-known work on Hegel and of course his work on existentialism as well. Throughout I will try to emphasize that, while Kaufmann is trying first and foremost to honor the vision of the subjects he is writing about, the specific nature of his interpretations informs his own views as well, such that there is a symbiotic connection between the two. As he explains Nietzsche and Hegel to others, he is drawing upon the ideas that he finds the most compelling and will consequently reappear again and again in his later work.

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<sup>2</sup> As of May 1, 2020, *The Portable Nietzsche* ranks #13 and *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* ranks #28 on the Amazon list of Best Sellers in the category of Individual Philosophers.

In the second chapter, I will deal with Kaufmann's transition into the role of a more overt critic of philosophical ideas, as exemplified in his first original work, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. It is here that Kaufmann first delineates his perspective on what philosophy should be as an academic discipline and where he sees himself as fitting into this milieu. This is also where Kaufmann first directly tackles many of the classic problems in the philosophy of religion in his own unique way, including the problem of defining religion, the oftentimes fuzzy relationship between religion and truth, and just what exactly a term like "God" means within a religious context. Special attention is given to particular philosophers and theologians that Kaufmann takes issue with, including Thomas Aquinas, Søren Kierkegaard, William James, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf Bultmann.

In the third and final chapter, I will illustrate Kaufmann's transformation into what he himself understands as a full-blown heretic in the defining work of his early career, *The Faith of a Heretic*. The specific themes that will be addressed here include Kaufmann's "quest for honesty," his more systematic attack on the practice of theology, and his ambitious interpretation of the comparative ethics of the Old and New Testaments. This critical work eventually culminates in Kaufmann's articulation of his own unique ethic of virtues, coupled with his insistence on a tragic worldview as one which is independent of and superior to a Christian worldview.

All that remains by way of introduction is a brief review of the previous work that has been done on this subject. It is brief indeed because there has been little work done on Kaufmann at all, which is one of the motivations for this project beyond my inherent interest. There are only two people who are worthy of special mention in the still nascent stage of Kaufmann studies. One of them is David Pickus, whom I have cited extensively, especially in the first chapter.

Pickus has written numerous articles on various aspects of Kaufmann's work, and I have found his observations about the unique status of Kaufmann within the field of Nietzsche scholarship to be especially insightful and helpful. But while these articles have been invaluable for my research, they do not exactly add up to a coherent vision of Kaufmann's philosophy as a whole, and Pickus has unfortunately not written much on Kaufmann's treatment of religion specifically. Then there is Stanley Corngold, who recently came out with an impressive intellectual biography, *Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic*. Corngold's book is a massive achievement in the way that it covers the entirety of Kaufmann's career, and admirers of Kaufmann will be forever in his debt for this great gift. However, Corngold is a scholar of comparative literature rather than philosophy, as is evidenced from his choice of emphases throughout his discussion of Kaufmann's work. Nevertheless, he makes interesting observations at times, and where they may support my argument I have cited them. So, Pickus and Corngold constitute the two major figures of Kaufmann studies at the moment. The dearth of secondary literature on Kaufmann has meant that I have oftentimes had to resort to book reviews which, while they can provide interesting insights into the way that Kaufmann's books were received at the time, generally do not contain extensive engagement with the ideas or arguments within them. All I can say is that I have tried to do my best with the small amount of material that is available.

Finally, I would like to briefly touch upon one of the greatest challenges in writing about Kaufmann, which involves determining the mindset that shapes his ideas and arguments. He engages with a great number of different figures and sources, and there is the temptation to try and match his expertise. Corngold puts this point especially well:

I do not know all the things Kaufmann knew before he set pen to paper (unlike him, I read very little Aramaic...and no Pali at all). Many of these “things” would have been available only to a student, like Kaufmann, of a classical German *Gymnasium* and thereafter at the Institute for Jewish Studies in Berlin, where they would have been received in a way that cannot be captured today. You can attempt to read all the books Kaufmann read and excerpted in philosophy, history, comparative religion, comparative literature...or begin to, for their number beggars belief.<sup>3</sup>

I plead the same ignorance as Corngold, but I have at least tried to do justice to many of the figures that Kaufmann engages with, and I do not hesitate to point out where I think Kaufmann is wrong or goes too far. Nevertheless, my interest in his work comes from a general sympathy and overall agreement with his position, and if I quote him too much in the pages that follow I can only refer to Corngold once again in my defense: “I cite him often because his voice in his work is far more resonant than that of any commentator’s.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Corngold, *Walter Kaufmann: Philosopher, Humanist, Heretic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), ix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

## Chapter 1: Finding One's Voice - Kaufmann the Commentator

The obvious starting point for a study of Walter Kaufmann is his work on Nietzsche, both because it comes at the beginning of his career and because it is the work with which he is most famously associated. Kaufmann may not be a household name within the field of philosophy, but if people know his name at all it is most likely because they remember it on the cover of a weathered copy of *The Portable Nietzsche* (“Edited and Translated by Walter Kaufmann”) or as the author of the provocatively titled study *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*.

### Nietzsche: A Simply Dreadful Topic?

Imagine Walter Kaufmann as a young man on the campus of Princeton University in the fall of 1947. He is a new hire in the philosophy department, and as he makes his way across the quad he runs into Albert Einstein, who has also been spending a lot of time in Princeton as a resident scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study. They strike up a conversation, and find that they have a fair amount in common, both being German-Jewish émigrés to the U.S. Eventually

Einstein asks the young man what he is currently working on, and the young man replies that he is working on a book about the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Einstein's face immediately darkens and he says, "But that is simply dreadful."

Something approximating this encounter actually happened.<sup>1</sup> What this demonstrates is that at the time that Kaufmann received his PhD from Harvard University in 1947 for his dissertation, "Nietzsche's Theory of Values," Nietzsche was *persona non grata* not just within the field of philosophy, but within the broader intellectual climate. This gives a unique context to the kind of philosophical work that Kaufmann was engaged with when he entered the field. He was not just doing standard philosophical exegesis and interpretation. He was also debunking widely held assumptions in his efforts to rehabilitate the reputation of a man whom he believed was worthy of serious philosophical study. Many of the elements in his first book, a full-length study of Nietzsche which he developed from his dissertation, would become hallmarks of his later work: a particular focus on the biographical details of a philosopher, a sustained case against dominant and seemingly uncontroversial views, and careful attention to linguistic nuance. David Pickus describes how Kaufmann's choice of subject matter here is indicative of his overall scholarly disposition:

His decision to write on Nietzsche at a time when, as he put it, Nietzsche was "in eclipse," illuminates the stubbornly individualistic streak in Kaufmann's personality. In graduate school, and throughout his academic career, Kaufmann wrote on topics and in a manner that differed markedly from the established philosophical "guild."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Walter A. Kaufmann's Princeton Faculty Page," accessed November 13, 2016, <https://philosophy.princeton.edu/about/past-faculty/walter-kaufmann>

<sup>2</sup> David Pickus, "At Home with Nietzsche, at War with Germany" in *The Fruits of Exile*, ed. Richard Bodek and Simon Lewis (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 157.



Throughout Kaufmann's work it is clear that he loves an intellectual challenge, and there were few such challenges greater than making a German philosopher who was quoted by the Nazis palatable to an English-speaking audience right after the Second World War.

### Demolishing the Legend

The extent of this challenge is clear from the very beginning of his study. The book begins with a prologue, entitled "The Nietzsche Legend." It is not often that a commentary on a philosopher begins with an extended account of all of the inaccurate and damaging information that has accreted around the subject in question, but Nietzsche was a unique case. His name carried so much baggage with it when Kaufmann was writing that it was necessary to first confront the misinformation head-on before moving on to the real work of analysis and interpretation. Kaufmann summarizes the conventional wisdom on Nietzsche, which leads into a clear mission statement for his own work:

Nietzsche became a myth even before he died in 1900, and today his ideas are overgrown and obscured by rank fiction. Divergent evaluations, of course, are not uncommon; but in Nietzsche's case there is not even basic agreement about what he stood for: his admirers are as much at odds about this as his critics. It might seem that one cannot properly speak of a Nietzsche legend where so many different conceptions are current, but it is actually typical of the manner in which legend appropriates historical figures that it takes no offense at generating clearly incompatible accounts. This situation, however, has led to the assumption that Nietzsche lacked any coherent philosophy, and that different readers are bound to come up with different interpretations. In a sense, the present book as a whole represents an attempt at a *constructive* refutation of this view[.]”<sup>3</sup>

The Nietzsche myth-making comes from all sides, both positive and negative, and this might understandably lead someone to the conclusion that Nietzsche's philosophy is vacuous, nothing more than a fun-house mirror that distortedly reflects back whatever is put in front of it.

Kaufmann is out to disprove this notion by demonstrating that Nietzsche actually did have a

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<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 3.

coherent philosophical position, even if it might require a careful search through his many writings in order to precisely ascertain what it is.

As Kaufmann patiently sifts through the misinformation about Nietzsche, he is able to identify some of the major culprits. Chief among them is his sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who gained control of his literary estate after he died. She is most responsible for Nietzsche being associated with anti-Semitism and pro-German chauvinism because of the selective manner in which she controlled the publication of his posthumous works. This is all the more egregious in light of the fact that while he was still alive and mentally lucid Nietzsche had a major falling-out with his sister when she married Bernhard Förster, a prominent member of an anti-Semitic German Nationalist movement. Kaufmann provides ample textual evidence in the form of letters to show, in no uncertain terms, that Nietzsche wanted nothing to do with anyone who promoted these kinds of ideas. After Nietzsche's death, Elizabeth published *The Will to Power* and promoted it as Nietzsche's magnum opus, when in fact it was an unfinished work which was abandoned by Nietzsche in favor of another, his projected *Revaluation of All Values*. What was published as *The Will to Power* was nothing more than a series of disorganized aphorisms, and this led many people to the conclusion that this was representative of Nietzsche's philosophical output as a whole. Indeed, this is a view espoused by Crane Brinton, who had written one of the few English-language books on Nietzsche that was popular during the period when Kaufmann was writing: "Later, his sister and her faithful co-workers brought together many of Nietzsche's fragments into a book they called *The Will to Power*. So fragmentary are most of the works he wrote in his own lifetime that this book hardly seems out of line with his

other books.”<sup>4</sup> This is the kind of dismissive and superficial scholarship that Kaufmann is trying to correct with his own study.

To further bolster his claims, Kaufmann describes how Elizabeth delayed the publication of the work which Nietzsche actually considered the culmination of his philosophical career, *Ecce Homo*. When this book was finally published, it was printed in an extremely expensive edition so that it would be inaccessible to the general public. *Ecce Homo* is also where Nietzsche most clearly and definitively states his opposition to anti-Semitism and German Nationalism. In this work, Kaufmann claims, “...we...hear the anguished cry of one who sees – foresees – himself mistaken for a writer he is not: for an apostle of military power and empire, a nationalist, and even a racist. In order to define himself emphatically, Nietzsche underlines (too often) and shrieks – to no avail.”<sup>5</sup> Kaufmann explains how all of these events relate to misinformation about Nietzsche:

The two most common forms of the Nietzsche legend can thus be traced back to his sister. In the manner just indicated [the promotion of *The Will to Power* as his magnum opus], she unwittingly laid the foundation for the myth that Nietzsche’s thought is hopelessly incoherent, ambiguous, and self-contradictory; and by bringing the heritage of her late husband to her interpretation of her brother’s work, she prepared the way for the belief that Nietzsche was a proto-Nazi. These two views, of course, are not generally held by the same people, though they do not logically exclude each other.<sup>6</sup>

Kaufmann identifies the other major culprits for the Nietzsche legend as Stefan George and Ernst Bertram. George was an influential German poet at the turn of the century who developed a circle of admirers and disciples who wanted a revival and renewal of the German language. The circle projected their hopes and ideologies onto Nietzsche with no concern for the extent to

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<sup>4</sup> Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 65. To be fair, Brinton was a historian, not a philosopher, so his book has a correspondingly different emphasis, but it is still a good example of a view of Nietzsche that Kaufmann was fighting against.

<sup>5</sup> “Editor’s Introduction to *Ecce Homo*” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 662.

<sup>6</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 8.

which these ideas corresponded to what Nietzsche actually wrote. Bertram was a member of this circle who was inspired to write the book *Nietzsche: Versuch einer Mythologie*, published in 1918 just as Germany had suffered a national humiliation with the loss of the First World War. The title itself demonstrates that this was an overt attempt to create a mythological picture of Nietzsche that would be useful as a means of artistic inspiration but would have nothing to do with his actual philosophical views. It is worth quoting Kaufmann's description of Bertram's project at length because he sees it as representative of the kind of violence that was done to the content of Nietzsche's writings by many others of this period as well:

What had hitherto been the largely unintentional result of the many hundred volumes of the Nietzsche literature, contributed at random by philosophers, literary critics, journalists, poets, psychiatrists, and others who often lacked any thorough knowledge of Nietzsche's works, Bertram sought to achieve deliberately through the cultivated incoherence of his chapters and a willful disregard for the sequence of Nietzsche's thought – even for the immediate context of his utterances. In his Introduction, Bertram renounced the very possibility of historiography: because it must needs involve a measure of interpretation, we cannot hope for more than 'legend.' The element of truth in this contention had of course long been recognized by historians and philosophers, including Nietzsche. What distinguished Bertram's book, which first brought this idea to the attention of many thousands, was the author's evident satisfaction with this half-truth and the way in which he used it to justify an open break with previously accepted standards of scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

Kaufmann goes on to point out that Bertram was later an apologist for the Nazis, which is not surprising given the kind of ideas he "derived" from Nietzsche. Kaufmann's point is that, if we look closely at how George and Bertram approached Nietzsche, it is clear that they merely used him as an occasion to further expand upon their own pre-existing ideologies.

So, having exposed the legendary aura around Nietzsche as the complete fiction it is, Kaufmann sets about the only path left for the responsible scholar and commentator – to go back to Nietzsche's original writings and, through careful and detailed analysis, construct a plausible

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

account of his *actual* philosophical views. Although it might seem to the casual reader as though Nietzsche was an erratic and mercurial thinker, holding one view and then discarding it for another, Kaufmann believes it is in fact possible to resolve these apparent paradoxes. He explains:

[T]he alleged contradictions can generally be resolved in one of two ways. The utterly superficial inconsistencies dissolve as soon as one checks the quotations and recognizes the meaning they had in their original context. (...) The apparently more profound contradictions can be resolved by the discovery of a larger context, namely that of Nietzsche's philosophy, his development, and his basic intentions – all of which are ignored by Bertram and in the legend generally.<sup>8</sup>

So, Kaufmann outlines two basic techniques to surmount the seeming inconsistencies of Nietzsche's writings: responsible academic rigor and the creation of an interpretive framework in which Nietzsche's many and varied thoughts can fit in at least relative harmony. His study as a whole can be understood as the creation of one such framework in which the death of God, the will to power, and the overman/eternal recurrence stand as the major foci. Kaufmann is intent to prove that Nietzsche was not an enigmatic romantic, but rather a philosopher more in the tradition of the Enlightenment who sought to express his ideas clearly, even if there were many times when he could not resist adding literary flourishes to them as well. Kaufmann ends his discussion of the Nietzsche legend by saying that "...we may conclude that his alleged ambiguity as well as his supposed affinity with Nazism – indeed, that the whole legend – depends on the failure to ask: What did Nietzsche oppose? What did he seek to overcome? What were his problems? The answers can be found when these questions are recognized."<sup>9</sup> These questions that Kaufmann raises will constitute his general approach throughout his study, and he gives us his controlling assumption and thesis statement as well: "Self-overcoming, not ambiguity, is the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

key to Nietzsche.”<sup>10</sup> Whether or not Kaufmann’s claim is accurate, it definitely breaks with much of the scholarship that had come before in its clarity and directness.

### Kaufmann’s Biographical Approach to Nietzsche

So, having dealt with Kaufmann’s demolition of the “Nietzsche Legend,” we can now proceed to the body of the study itself. But even here, Kaufmann is still not quite ready to begin a discussion of the content of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Rather, the first chapter deals extensively with Nietzsche’s biography, and has the interesting title “Nietzsche’s Life as Background of His Thought.” This is worth dwelling on because I think it gives us some interesting insights into Kaufmann’s methodology as a philosopher and commentator. Within the field of philosophy, it is rare to focus much upon the life of a philosopher and to consider him as a man of flesh and blood. Rather, a philosopher’s ideas are supposed to speak for themselves. There is certainly a difference of opinion on this issue between the Anglo-American and Continental traditions, and it is interesting to note that Kaufmann was writing at a time when these two traditions were beginning to diverge but had not yet done so completely. But generally speaking, a biography of a philosopher and a study of his philosophy are two different kinds of books. A quick biographical sketch within a philosophical study may be customary, but Kaufmann’s chapter on Nietzsche’s life is one of the longest chapters in the book and really constitutes a mini biography. Why would Kaufmann devote so much space to Nietzsche’s life before getting on with the business of interpreting his philosophy?

The obvious answer is that the subject matter in question demands it, which I think is correct. Nietzsche is an unusual case among philosophers. We have already seen how Kaufmann

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 16.

had to spend a certain amount of time correcting misperceptions about him. This would not be as necessary when writing about other thinkers, and much of Kaufmann's biographical account is a continuation of the themes of the prologue since there are numerous myths concerning events in Nietzsche's life as well. In addition, Nietzsche's life story is particularly intriguing and seems to somehow be connected to his writings in a way that just doesn't seem to be the case with many other philosophers.<sup>11</sup>

However, this turns out to be only a partial answer when considering Kaufmann's entire philosophical oeuvre. As we shall see later on, Kaufmann does not shy away from drawing upon the biographical details of philosophers in discussions of them and will even use these details to make important points about their philosophical claims. This is true not only in cases where it is obviously relevant, such as Nietzsche, but also with philosophers like Hegel or Thomas Aquinas who are so associated with highly abstract philosophical systems that the fact that these were the products of actual human beings oftentimes gets overlooked. This aspect of Kaufmann's approach is certainly related to the fact that he was also a leading expositor of existentialism as a worldview which emphasized the personal experience of the individual as a source of valuable philosophical insights. But what is most important to recognize here is how this approach illustrates the profound influence that Nietzsche had on Kaufmann's philosophical development. He began his career studying a philosopher whose life story was particularly significant and relevant to the ideas that he wrote about and concluded that the same must be the case, at least to some extent, for every other philosopher as well.

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<sup>11</sup> Another notable case where there is such a connection is Kierkegaard, and it is no accident that there is an abundance of material comparing these two philosophers.

Kaufmann's close focus upon Nietzsche's biography turns out to yield some interesting insights. In his account of Nietzsche's early years as a professor of philology at the University of Basel, he describes the influence that one of his colleagues, Jacob Burckhardt, had upon him. It was during this period that Nietzsche wrote his first full-length work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, an extremely unconventional work of philology that celebrated the operas of Richard Wagner as a modern-day revival of Greek tragedy. Burckhardt was highly critical of this work but appreciated the parts of it that were actually about ancient Greece. Kaufmann provides an interesting interpretation of this relationship:

Perhaps Burckhardt, like Goethe, looked back upon the storm and stress of his own youth, sensed in himself a still dangerous medley of passions that could be controlled only by maintaining a subtle equilibrium, and deliberately refused to become involved in the younger man's comet-like career which for Burckhardt could mean only destruction. While Goethe, however, deeply wounded men like Hölderlin and Kleist – the poets whose meteoric lives, ending respectively in insanity and suicide, invite comparison with Nietzsche's – Burckhardt managed to let Nietzsche feel his sympathy; and the younger man was frequently less struck by the ironical reserve of Burckhardt's letters to him than we are today.<sup>12</sup>

Kaufmann sees Nietzsche's relationship with Burckhardt and the older colleague's impact upon the young man as illustrative of the way in which Nietzsche will ultimately reject his friendship with Wagner. Nietzsche's break with Wagner is a familiar story, but Kaufmann draws further philosophical implications. Through the counsel of the even-tempered Burckhardt, Nietzsche was able to reject not just Wagner but romanticism in general. This relates to another misconception which Kaufmann is intent to debunk with his study: Nietzsche was *not* a romantic.

This point in particular is further bolstered by the mention of Goethe in the passage above. Kaufmann's overall understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy is highly informed by

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 27.



Goethe, another figure who is often mistakenly labeled as a romantic. This dimension of Kaufmann's account can be easily overlooked, but it represents something unique which Kaufmann brings to his philosophical interpretation and is certainly due to his background as a *German-American*. Pickus points out the further significance of this approach:

Kaufmann's "constructive refutation" of the Nietzsche legend is not so much aimed at anyone like the Nazis, as at writers who would interpret Nietzsche without a sensitivity to an intellectual tradition centered around self-confrontation in the service of *Bildung* and other German ideals of self-cultivation. To be sure, he did not say this openly, and we should be as wary of "discovering" non-existent positive messages in him. Nevertheless, the great many approving and detailed references to Goethe found throughout his book should alert us to the fact that Kaufmann speaks with a different vocabulary than most contemporary writers on Nietzsche, particularly in English speaking lands.<sup>13</sup>

It is only when we recognize these kinds of contributions Kaufmann makes that we can begin to see how his study of Nietzsche provides us with much more than just arguments against Nietzsche being associated with anti-Semitism and the Third Reich. Far more important for Kaufmann, after the initial necessary ground-clearing, is to present a positive account of Nietzsche as a philosopher who encourages his readers to challenge themselves and, in so doing, discover their highest selves.

What Kaufmann seeks to demonstrate through his biographical examination is the way in which Nietzsche himself was able to provide a living example of this kind of self-overcoming. One of the places where this comes through most clearly is in his discussion of Nietzsche and his sister. Despite the fact that Nietzsche had a falling-out with his sister over the issue of anti-Semitism, the fact remains that Nietzsche's relationship with Elizabeth was one of the few close and meaningful relationships in his life. He seemed to maintain a kind of loyalty and devotion to

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<sup>13</sup> David Pickus, "The Walter Kaufmann Myth: A Study in Academic Judgment," *Nietzsche-Studien* Vol. 32 (2003), 237.

her while avoiding falling prey to her intellectual weaknesses, and Kaufmann sees this as especially significant. Drawing a parallel to the writings of Dostoevsky, he explains:

One may recall *The Brothers Karamazov*: there are four brothers, and the clue to the character of each is that whatever is embodied explicitly in one is implicitly present in the other three. (...) So, too, Nietzsche's sister was, as it were, the embodiment in the flesh of that part of his character which he tried, all his adult life long, to overcome. That he really was not entirely unlike her is true enough but misses the more significant point: because he was cursed with the same heritage that came to full flower in her, his philosophy was a triumph of integrity.<sup>14</sup>

By examining Nietzsche's life, Kaufmann seeks to point out that Nietzsche truly practiced what he preached. It is one thing to write something like, "One must be honest in matters of the spirit to the point of hardness"<sup>15</sup> but it is quite another to actually put a familial relationship at risk because of a profound intellectual disagreement.

The quote above is taken from the Preface to *The Antichrist*, which was written in 1888, the final productive year of Nietzsche's life, and leads into the last major issue which Kaufmann addresses regarding the relationship between Nietzsche's biography and his works. Nietzsche suffered from all kinds of health problems throughout his life, but he eventually had a complete mental breakdown which left him in a vegetative state for the last eleven years of his life. There has been much speculation about the cause of this breakdown, but Kaufmann agrees with the conventional diagnosis that it was most likely syphilis. In a footnote, he provides a helpful summary of the literature on this topic which balances the salacious rumors of Nietzsche having visited prostitutes with less exciting theories that posit that he may have contracted the disease while serving as a medic during the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>16</sup> However, the philosophical significance here is to what extent does this mental and physical decline cast doubt upon

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<sup>14</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> *The Antichrist* in *Portable Nietzsche*, 568.

<sup>16</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 69.

Nietzsche's later writings? To illustrate the kind of position against which Kaufmann is arguing, consider the following, which was written by one of his interlocutors: "...in the last weeks and even months of 1888 Nietzsche's mind underwent a steadily increasing deterioration. This makes it ludicrous to take any of his actions and 'decisions' seriously, or to think of him as a normal man."<sup>17</sup> Kaufmann does grant that one can notice a difference in Nietzsche's style as the end draws near, but he nevertheless asserts that up until then Nietzsche was still producing philosophically valuable work: "In his later works we find a steady decrease in tact and a rapidly mounting lack of inhibition, and the form of expression shows signs of the coming madness. The contents of the books, however, cannot be disposed of lightly."<sup>18</sup> Just as Nietzsche himself said "The errors of great men are venerable because they are more fruitful than the truths of little men,"<sup>19</sup> Kaufmann believes that Nietzsche working at diminished capacity is still more valuable than most other philosophers working at full capacity.

## Kaufmann's Construction of a Unified Nietzschean Vision

### Methodology

Kaufmann begins his analysis of Nietzsche's philosophy with an examination of methodology. This is a crucial first step in his overall case that Nietzsche had a unified and complete philosophical vision. At the outset, Kaufmann makes a seemingly paradoxical assertion: "Nietzsche's books are easier to read but harder to understand than those of almost any

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Walter Brann, "A Reply to Walter Kaufmann," 249. This article is a direct refutation of many claims Kaufmann makes in his study of Nietzsche. Unfortunately, these refutations mostly take the form of bare assertions without citations or evidence to back them up. This is understandable given that this article is a brief book review rather than a detailed scholarly essay, but it is also illustrative of the "myth" of Walter Kaufmann which David Pickus talks about at length and which will be examined in more detail later.

<sup>18</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 70.

<sup>19</sup> *Portable Nietzsche*, 30.

other thinker.”<sup>20</sup> However, he goes on to further clarify his meaning by pointing out that the difficulties involved in understanding Nietzsche are the inverse of what is involved with many other challenging philosophers when he makes the observation that “...it is perhaps easier to form an opinion of the general meaning of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* than to grasp the precise significance of any number of sentences in that work - while in Nietzsche’s books the individual sentences seem clear enough and it is the total design that puzzles us.”<sup>21</sup> This might lead one to the conclusion that there really is no “total design” and that, while Nietzsche may be a great prose stylist and a skilled composer of epigrams, he is not truly a philosopher with a comprehensive worldview. However, Kaufmann astutely observes that Nietzsche’s unconventional methodology is not a reflection of his limitations as a philosopher, but rather a way in which the case of Nietzsche sheds light on the limitations of the traditional concept of what a philosopher is supposed to be. Foremost among these is the assumption that a philosopher must have a “system.” Kaufmann notes that “...Nietzsche’s style makes impossible the systematic approach which is usually adopted in the study of other thinkers.”<sup>22</sup> He goes on to point out that the main problem Nietzsche had with philosophical systems is that they must always depend upon a certain number of premises which remain unquestioned. Nietzsche was unable to accept this conceit of systematic thinking. He did not necessarily regard systems as a waste of time, but he thought that there was an inherent limitation to them that stifled genuine and honest philosophic thought:

Systems, says Nietzsche, are good insofar as they reveal the character of a great thinker – but this goodness is independent of the truth of a system. (...) The thinker who believes in the ultimate truth of his system, without questioning its presuppositions, appears more stupid than he is: he refuses to think beyond a certain point; and this is, according to

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<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 75.

Nietzsche, a subtle moral corruption. In this sense, systems are bad – but this assertion does not contradict the earlier affirmation that they are good: rather it follows from this very affirmation. They are not good in every way, and their being good in one way involves their being bad in another.<sup>23</sup>

This prejudice in favor of systems is really only a comparatively recent phenomenon within the history of philosophy and had been most notably exemplified by Nietzsche's immediate precursors within the tradition of German philosophy such as Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schopenhauer. Kaufmann insists that Nietzsche is following another path that also has perfect legitimacy and precedence within the history of philosophy. Kaufmann argues that "Nietzsche is, like Plato, not a system-thinker but a problem-thinker."<sup>24</sup> Kaufmann further elaborates upon what this designation means: "In the problem situation premises are involved, and some of these are made explicit in the course of the inquiry. The result is less a solution of the initial problem than a realization of its limitations: typically, the problem is not solved but 'outgrown.'"<sup>25</sup> There are two important points to note here. The first is that Kaufmann himself will adopt the "problem-thinker" approach in his own original philosophical work. This is one of the most significant ways in which Kaufmann found his own intellectual voice while interpreting another figure. The other is that the "problem-thinker" description hearkens back not just to Plato but to Socrates and explains why Kaufmann ends his study of Nietzsche with a lengthy and controversial discussion of the relationship between these two men specifically.

Kaufmann is aware that this facet of Nietzsche's philosophy presents numerous pitfalls and he is intent to avoid them if possible. He disparages two extremes of methodology: on the one hand, one could simply catalog all of Nietzsche's aphorisms under different subject headings

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 82. Kaufmann cites Nicolai Hartmann's *Der Philosophische Gedanke und seine Geschichte* (1936) as the origin of this distinction.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

of problems. This would be not only difficult because so many of them touch upon numerous topics simultaneously, but it would also ignore the overall evolution of Nietzsche's thought-process over time. On the other hand, there is the tendency of many people to explain all of Nietzsche's philosophical ideas purely in terms of biographical details, thereby trivializing them.<sup>26</sup> Because Kaufmann has already dealt with Nietzsche's biography at length and acknowledged the numerous controversies surrounding the man himself, he is able to deal with Nietzsche's philosophy on its own terms, connected to but also independent of any extraneous concerns that might otherwise be mere distractions.

So, given his status as a problem-thinker, how does Nietzsche approach his problems? Kaufmann identifies the guiding thread throughout the varied content of Nietzsche's oeuvre as that of experimentation. Nietzsche is like a scientist testing out his many provisional hypotheses. It is in this way that Kaufmann is able to make sense out of Nietzsche's unsystematic and seemingly erratic style which has been over-romanticized by previous commentators. Kaufmann describes Nietzsche's approach as looking at a problem from as many different perspectives as possible and, in so doing, getting closer and closer to the truth: "Each aphorism or sequence of aphorisms...may be considered as a thought experiment. The discontinuity or, positively speaking, the great number of experiments, reflects the conviction that making only one experiment would be one-sided."<sup>27</sup> So experimentation describes the content of the method itself. It is, however, misleading as an indicator of the overall attitude behind the method. Although Nietzsche does strive to adopt the scientific method when dealing with important philosophical issues related to psychology and morality, his writing style indicates that he does not maintain

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 85.

the detached, objective attitude one normally associates with such a method. The problems to which Nietzsche devotes his attention are of more than mere “academic” interest. Kaufmann goes on to explain: “The problem itself is experienced deeply, and only problems that are experienced so deeply are given consideration. Only problems that present themselves so forcefully that they threaten the thinker’s present mode of life lead to philosophic inquiries.”<sup>28</sup> This duality in Kaufmann’s interpretation of Nietzsche is crucially important: Nietzsche’s philosophical methodology hearkens back to the Enlightenment, yet his attitude towards the problems he analyzes is more in line with the Romantics. Every philosophical problem is a life-and-death struggle. Otherwise, what would be the point in tackling the problem in the first place?

### The Death of God and the Revaluation

Nowhere is this “romantic” attitude more evident than in the case of one of Nietzsche’s most famous and influential ideas: the death of God. Nietzsche’s statement on this issue in the form of the parable of the madman in aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science* is probably the single most widely known passage in all of his writings, but it may also be one of the most misunderstood. Modern-day atheists tend to look at Nietzsche’s statement on the death of God as some kind of triumphant declaration that opened the door for secular people to finally “come out of the closet” and throw off the shackles of traditional religion, but Kaufmann makes it clear that Nietzsche did not see it that way at all. Rather, Nietzsche saw the society in which he lived to be on the brink of a crisis, and he wanted to try to avert that crisis if at all possible. The scientific advances which had been steadily increasing since the Renaissance were quickly rendering traditional religious belief untenable, yet the Christian religion was nevertheless such a strong

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 89.

and persistent social tradition that to simply do away with it was also not a live option. As Kaufmann explains, it is this seemingly impossible situation which motivated Nietzsche to express himself the way he did: “Nietzsche prophetically envisages himself as a madman: to have lost God means madness; and when mankind will discover that it has lost God, universal madness will break out. This apocalyptic sense of dreadful things to come hangs over Nietzsche’s thinking like a thundercloud.”<sup>29</sup> Contemporary atheism has developed an aura of smugness around it, especially due to the efforts of outspoken proponents of the New Atheism movement such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, but Kaufmann emphasizes that Nietzsche had no such self-satisfaction in his atheist position. He describes how Nietzsche “...felt the agony, the suffering, and the misery of a godless world so intensely, at a time when others were yet blind to its tremendous consequence, that he was able to experience in advance, as it were, the fate of a coming generation.”<sup>30</sup> As Kaufmann sees it, Nietzsche took no joy in the non-existence of God. It was simply a brute fact that had to be dealt with somehow.

Kaufmann draws a clear line from Nietzsche’s insight into the death of God to one of his most important ideas, the revaluation of all values. Again, he is careful to emphasize that what might seem to be a provocative and revolutionary idea is really just an instance of Nietzsche following an empirical observation to its logical conclusion. Nietzsche was keenly aware of a possible conclusion that could be drawn from atheism which is most famously stated by Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov: if God does not exist, then everything is permitted.<sup>31</sup> With the traditional foundation of Christian morality gone, what is to stop civilization from devolving into

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, Nietzsche probably never read *The Brothers Karamazov*, but such an idea was prevalent in the European intellectual climate of the time.



complete anarchy? However, Nietzsche found Christian morality to be just as meaningless because it focused upon an imaginary realm rather than the world we live in. As Kaufmann describes: “To escape nihilism – which seems involved both in asserting the existence of God and thus robbing *this* world of ultimate significance, and also in denying God and thus robbing *everything* of meaning and value – that is Nietzsche’s greatest and most persistent problem.”<sup>32</sup>

One of the most pernicious misunderstandings of Nietzsche’s philosophy which Kaufmann takes particular pains to correct is the notion that Nietzsche was a nihilist. In fact, Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche’s entire philosophy was a sustained attempt to forestall nihilism. It is easy to look at Nietzsche’s philosophical outlook as inherently negative in character but Kaufmann, citing Hegel, argues against this:

In Hegelian terms, Nietzsche’s attitude is positive insofar as he negates a negation – for he considers Christianity as the ‘revaluation of all the values of antiquity.’ More judiciously put, he points out how our accepted morality is dying of internal inconsistencies. His No consists in the acceptance of a *fait accompli*. The philosopher only lays bare the cancerous growth.<sup>33</sup>

Nietzsche was merely diagnosing certain conditions which already existed within modernity.

Belief systems go through change and evolution over time, and Christianity had finally become as outdated as the pagan beliefs which it supplanted. However, it is important to note that

Nietzsche’s revaluation of Christianity was an internal critique as well. His philosophical outlook involved not just the notion that belief in God was no longer relevant in a culture guided by reason and the scientific method, but also “...the alleged discovery that our morality is, *by its own standards*, poisonously immoral: that Christian love is the mimicry of impotent hatred; that most unselfishness is but a particularly vicious form of selfishness; and that *ressentiment* is at the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 112.

core of our morals.”<sup>34</sup> When one employs philosophical analysis to Christian ideas of morality and the underlying motivations behind doing good works, one finds numerous inconsistencies and unpleasant truths behind the façade of Christian ideals. Kaufmann’s interpretation of Nietzsche on this point is plausible and relatively uncontroversial, but this idea of Christianity as an inherently hypocritical and unstable religion is a point which Kaufmann will expand upon in his own philosophy of religion.

This internal critique of Christianity has a historical dimension as well. Kaufmann describes Nietzsche’s views of how the Christian religion lost its way from its beginnings: “Christianity, as he [Nietzsche] sees it, was originally a call to man *not* to conform, to leave father and mother, and to perfect himself.”<sup>35</sup> Kaufmann even reads Nietzsche as having seen value in this initial, unfiltered message of Christianity, but unfortunately such a message was too subtle to be properly understood by those in charge of spreading it:

The kingdom of God is in the hearts of men – and Nietzsche accuses Christianity of having betrayed this fundamental insight from the beginning, whether by transferring the kingdom into *another* world and thus depreciating *this* life, or by becoming political and seeking salvation through organizations, churches, cults, sacraments, or priests.<sup>36</sup>

This is an interesting line of criticism for Nietzsche to pursue since it is one which is taken up by many Christian thinkers as well. One prominent advocate of such a view was Kierkegaard, who is often grouped with Nietzsche as a “proto-existentialist.” Kierkegaard emphasized the hypocrisy of modern Christianity by drawing a distinction between the actual religion and the watered-down, socially acceptable phenomenon of “Christendom” in which everyone is automatically considered a Christian simply by virtue of being born in a country in which it is

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 165.

the state religion. However, Kierkegaard still identified as a Christian despite his unconventional attitude towards the religion, and Kaufmann draws a crucial distinction between Nietzsche's brand of existentialism and the kind that is more sympathetic to religious belief: "Like Pascal and Kierkegaard and many another, Nietzsche, too, knew the temptation to let doubt be bygone and to 'leap' – as Kierkegaard himself would put it – into faith. What distinguishes Nietzsche is not that he experienced this attraction, but that he felt obliged to resist it to retain his integrity."<sup>37</sup> When confronted with the realization that there are no objective values, there would seem to be two constructive solutions: one can either accept an existing value system like Christianity while somehow "making it one's own," or else one can attempt to create one's own values from scratch. The first option is that which Kierkegaard advocated, even though his writings continually emphasize how truly difficult it is to actually be an authentic Christian. However, for Kaufmann's Nietzsche this first option is not really any kind of option at all, and in support of this Kaufmann makes reference to a section of the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* entitled "On the Afterworldly": "Weariness that wants to reach the ultimate with one leap, with one fatal leap, a poor ignorant weariness that does not want to want any more: this created all gods and afterworlds."<sup>38</sup> Kaufmann is intent to distance Nietzsche from any kind of romantic celebration of the irrational. He argues that Nietzsche sees such an attitude as not only intellectually dishonest but lazy. The prevalence of such a perspective merely proves that most people simply do not have what it takes to face reality on its own terms and to create their own values.

While Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche rejects the romantic approach to religious belief as exemplified by Kierkegaard and the "leap of faith," he points out that the full implications of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 125. See also *The Portable Nietzsche*, 143.

Nietzsche's revaluation are not in line with rationalist approaches to religion either, despite his claims elsewhere that Nietzsche is generally closer to the Enlightenment than to Romanticism. Many philosophers of the so-called Age of Reason believed that there were plenty of valuable insights from the older religious traditions and that all that was necessary to preserve them was to separate them from the accompanying superstitious beliefs that were no longer tenable in light of recent scientific advances. One of the most vivid and literal examples of this attitude was when Thomas Jefferson took a pair of scissors and cut out every instance of miracles and supernaturalism in the New Testament while leaving in the ethical teachings. Two of the most prominent philosophers representing this view were Lessing and Kant. Lessing claimed that we who live in modernity no longer need miracles as proof of the validity of Jesus' message since we can clearly see its value without them,<sup>39</sup> and Kant's philosophy of religion as a whole can also be seen as an exposition of this kind of view since it was largely an extension and corollary of his ethical philosophy. Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche diverges from these philosophers because, while they were trying to separate moral values from the irrational elements of religion, the values themselves were still ultimately based on God:

Neither Lessing nor Kant had seriously questioned the existence of God: perhaps it would be misleading to say that they reintroduced God through the rear door, since God had really been in the back of their minds all along. They had merely tried to do without him and to forget about his existence for a moment – but the idea of God, like a repressed wish in psychoanalysis, was loath to be so forcibly ignored and made its reappearance under a new guise.<sup>40</sup>

As Kaufmann sees it, Nietzsche goes much further, and "...because he *really* questioned it [God's existence], he lacked Lessing's and Kant's easy conviction that our ancient values could

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<sup>39</sup> See Gotthold Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power" in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), 55-56.

<sup>40</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 127.

be salvaged after the ancient God had been banished from the realm of philosophic thought.”<sup>41</sup>

The non-existence of God is more than a mere intellectual exercise for Nietzsche. It is the complete shattering of the dominant paradigm of Western civilization, and thus everything associated with God has to be discarded as well. If God is truly dead, then the attempt to save the good, “rational” elements of religion would be like trying to save limbs from a rotting corpse.

Nietzsche’s resistance to being categorized as any one kind of thinker despite numerous attempts from many directions is a leitmotif throughout Kaufmann’s interpretation. At one point, he puts it quite succinctly: “He celebrated reason, like some of the thinkers of the Enlightenment, and passion, like some of the Romantics; he is in many ways close to modern positivism, but the Existentialists recognize their own pathos in him, and many Christians feel they understand him best.”<sup>42</sup> To some extent this is true of all great philosophers - although Descartes, Hume, or Kant may be most closely associated with a particular movement, each one of them is really *sui generis*. But Kaufmann points out that the case of Nietzsche presents further difficulties in this respect because his philosophy evolved over time and he does not always use consistent terminology. One of the clearest examples of how this could cause confusion is Nietzsche’s discussion of the god Dionysus, who takes on a special significance in his later writings. Again, because of this one could draw the conclusion that Nietzsche must have been a romantic if he sought to emulate such a god, but this is based on a misunderstanding of how Nietzsche’s concept of Dionysus developed over time:

It has been overlooked that the Dionysus whom Nietzsche celebrated as his own god in his later writings is no longer the deity of formless frenzy whom we meet in Nietzsche’s first book. Only the name remains, but later the Dionysian represents passion *controlled* as opposed to the extirpation of the passions which Nietzsche more and more associated with Christianity. The “Dionysus” in the Dionysus versus Apollo of Nietzsche’s first

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>42</sup> “Introduction” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 15.

book and the “*Dionysus versus the Crucified*” in the last line of Nietzsche’s last book do not mean the same thing. The later Dionysus is the synthesis of the two forces represented by Dionysus and Apollo in *The Birth of Tragedy* – and thus Goethe, certainly not an anti-Apollinian, can appear in one of Nietzsche’s last books [*Twilight of the Idols*] as the perfect representation of what is now called Dionysian.<sup>43</sup>

Kaufmann’s mention of Goethe once again is significant. He represents an expansive, all-encompassing vision of life in which extremes are balanced in a harmonious unity, and is thus an exemplar of the kind of self-realization which Kaufmann sees as the essence of Nietzsche’s philosophy: “What he wanted was *totality*; he fought the mutual extraneousness of reason, senses, feeling, and will (preached with the most abhorrent scholasticism by *Kant*, the antipode of Goethe); he disciplined himself to wholeness, he *created* himself.”<sup>44</sup> Kaufmann’s emphasis on the connection between Nietzsche and Goethe is at the heart of his humanistic interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy and serves as an important lens through which he views Nietzsche’s more infamous and controversial ideas.

### The Will to Power

This humanistic slant is especially significant in Kaufmann’s discussion of the will to power, which he identifies as the second major aspect of Nietzsche’s unified philosophic vision. Kaufmann is intent upon dispelling the myths and misconceptions surrounding this idea since it is yet another which is well-known but not well-understood. He begins his discussion by linking it to the evolution of Dionysus and therefore to Nietzsche’s transition from dualism to monism:

When Nietzsche introduced the will to power into his thought, all the dualistic tendencies which had rent it previously could be reduced to mere manifestations of this basic drive. Thus a reconciliation was finally effected between Dionysus and Apollo, nature and value, wastefulness and purpose, empirical and true self, and *physis* and culture.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 129.

<sup>44</sup> From *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 554.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

As Kaufmann sees it, Nietzsche had finally hit upon a single concept which was both simple enough and flexible enough to explain everything. The underlying motivation of all actions and endeavors, whether human or animal, is towards the accumulation and expression of power. However, such a notion can be easily misinterpreted. As is the case with the death of God, it might seem as though Nietzsche were advocating some kind of nihilistic vision in which there are no absolute values and Might makes Right. But in fact, power is not to be understood as an end in itself: “Power is enjoyed only as *more* power. One enjoys not its possession but its increase: the overcoming of impotence. (...) Nietzsche’s thought seems to be this: man wants neither power nor independence – as such. He wants not freedom *from* something but freedom to act and realize himself.”<sup>46</sup> Kaufmann opts for an interpretation which aligns with his overall theory of Nietzsche’s advocacy of a philosophy of *self*-overcoming. The will to power is not the will to exert power over others, but rather over oneself.

Kaufmann further develops this interpretation with numerous citations from Nietzsche’s writings, but among the most important are those from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he sees as the culmination of Nietzsche’s philosophic vision even though the method of expression in that work is oftentimes coded and enigmatic. Nietzsche first mentions the will to power in the section “On the Thousand and One Goals,” in which he identifies it as the common element across different cultural and religious value systems:

A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcomings; behold, it is the voice of their will to power.

Praiseworthy is whatever seems difficult to a people; whatever seems indispensable and difficult is called good; and whatever liberates even out of the deepest need, the rarest, the most difficult – that they call holy.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>47</sup> From *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 170. See also Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 200.

The will to power is behind all human ambition, including spiritual practices that seek to bring the practitioner to some kind of state of enlightenment. Nietzsche's will to power is meant to illustrate human action and psychology on a deep and fundamental level because it affects everyone. Whether one has power or lacks it, the principle applies: "A privation of power gives rise to both fear and the will to power: fear is the negative motive which would make us avoid something; the will to power is the positive motive which would make us strive for something."<sup>48</sup> So understood, power can only be a good thing. It is only a corrupting influence among those who are not used to having power or who are not *truly* powerful despite having some kind of superficial authority. Once again pointing to Goethe as Nietzsche's ideal of a man who possessed an abundance of both power and love, Kaufmann draws out the full implications of this perspective: "Only the weak need to convince themselves and others of their might by inflicting hurt: the truly powerful are not concerned with others but act out of a fullness and an overflow."<sup>49</sup> This line of interpretation is crucial to understanding Kaufmann's study as a whole: he is intent to demonstrate that, while Nietzsche may have been guilty of using bombastic language in the expression of his ideas, the ideas themselves are eminently reasonable and useful in helping lead people to living happier and more productive lives.

The largest part of Kaufmann's study is devoted to further explicating Nietzsche's philosophical views on power since he sees this area as the main source of misunderstandings about his philosophy as a whole. He addresses a common criticism of Nietzsche: the will to power appears to be a metaphysical concept that Nietzsche is using to explain all of reality. Consequently, the use of such a concept would cause one to overlook or ignore individual cases

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<sup>48</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 190.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.



and variations. However, Kaufmann argues that this would be a misinterpretation of the will to power because it is actually derived from Nietzsche's interpretation of empirical phenomena and is therefore based on existing data out there in the world. Kaufmann makes the bold claim, "His [Nietzsche's] theory of the will to power might be the one and only interpretation of human behavior of which we are capable when we consider the evidence and think about it as clearly as we can."<sup>50</sup> This statement of Kaufmann's is qualified just enough to make it plausible, but one can see how Nietzsche's audacious style of expression is beginning to influence Kaufmann as well. Nevertheless, he presents an extensive defense of this claim in his further analysis of Nietzsche's philosophy of power. After having linked Nietzsche's will to power with self-overcoming, Kaufmann further elaborates upon how this also constitutes Nietzsche's basic moral philosophy. In support of this, he explains how Nietzsche interprets all other moral philosophies as having this same implied goal:

The force and plausibility of utilitarianism are inseparable from its insistence that the individual must overcome himself and subordinate his interests to those of the greatest number. In so-called primitive moral codes, too, the element of self-control and the disciplining of the inclinations is invariably present. Self-overcoming may thus be considered the common essence of all moral codes, from "totem and taboo" to the ethics of the Buddha.<sup>51</sup>

All morality involves going against our natural, animalistic inclinations and thereby bringing them under control. When understood in this way, Nietzsche's morality appears similar to that of Christian and other traditional religious moralities. However, there is an important difference which Kaufmann points out by citing an aphorism from *The Will to Power*:

*Religious morality.* – Affect, great desire, the passion for power, love, revenge, possessions -: moralists want to extinguish and uproot them, to "purify" the soul of them.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 213.

The logic is: the desires often produce great misfortune – consequently they are evil, reprehensible. A man must free himself from them: otherwise he cannot be a *good* man –

This is the same logic as: “if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.” In the particular case in which that dangerous “innocent from the country,” the founder of Christianity, recommended this practice to his disciples, the case of sexual excitation, the consequence is, unfortunately, not only the loss of an organ but the *emasculatio*n of a man’s character – And the same applies to the moralist’s madness that demands, instead of the restraining of the passions, their extirpation. Its conclusion is always: only the castrated man is a good man.<sup>52</sup>

In order for one to truly overcome oneself and thereby satisfy one’s will to power, there must be genuine *resistance* against which one is struggling. The traditional Christian approach is to strive to eliminate one’s passions so as to eliminate temptation, but Kaufmann’s Nietzsche sees this as a sign of weakness. As Kaufmann further explains: “To be moral is to overcome one’s impulse; if one does not have any impulses, one is not therefore moral.”<sup>53</sup> It is probably psychologically impossible to completely eradicate one’s baser instincts, but Kaufmann reads Nietzsche as claiming that, even if such a thing were possible, it would go against actual human flourishing. There is nothing morally praiseworthy about being an ethical automaton who does the right thing simply because one feels no inclination to do the wrong thing.

Because Kaufmann sees Nietzsche’s will to power as an instrument of a monistic worldview, it applies not just to the passions but to reason as well. Many philosophers have interpreted reason and the passions as fundamentally distinct from one another, but for Kaufmann this is yet another way in which Nietzsche departs significantly from the tradition. In his account of Nietzsche’s perspective on reason, Kaufmann notes the way in which it is related to the same methodology which led to the death of God: “[Nietzsche] did not consider it legitimate to accept unquestioned the traditional belief in the supranatural status of reason.

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<sup>52</sup> *The Will to Power*, 207. See also Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 222-223.

<sup>53</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 224.

Having questioned God, he felt obliged also to question the supernatural origin of reason.”<sup>54</sup> For Kaufmann’s Nietzsche, the very notion that there is a rational faculty that can furnish us with some kind of objective standpoint outside of our unique human subjectivity is not something that can simply be taken for granted. However, Kaufmann is quick to point out that this does not mean that Nietzsche was essentially an irrationalist either. Rather, he reads Nietzsche as a philosopher who values both reason and the passions while also explaining them in terms of a single basic source. Kaufmann identifies Nietzsche as a “dialectical monist” who asserts that the will to power can manifest itself as “Dionysian passionate striving” or as “an inherent [Apollinian] capacity to give itself form.”<sup>55</sup> The rational, Apollinian side of the will to power is an essential element because it “...is the ‘highest’ manifestation of the will to power, in the distinct sense that through rationality it can realize its objective most fully.”<sup>56</sup> So reason is highly valued, but its relation to the will to power means that it must always be essentially a means to an end beyond itself:

Reason is extolled not because it is the faculty that abstracts from the given, forms universal concepts, and draws inferences, but because these skills enable it to develop foresight and to give consideration to all the impulses, to organize their chaos, to integrate them into a harmony – and thus to give man power: power over himself and over nature. In human affairs, too, Nietzsche points out, reason gives men greater power than sheer bodily strength.<sup>57</sup>

This aspect of Kaufmann’s interpretation of Nietzsche is particularly significant because it lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding Kaufmann as the man who supposedly domesticated the wild, irrational Nietzsche into just another rationalist. As can be seen here, Kaufmann’s approach is far subtler than that. He argues that Nietzsche is a philosopher who values reason but who also

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

seeks to describe its place within human conduct accurately and without romanticizing it in the way that so many other philosophers have. As Kaufmann succinctly puts it: “The will to power is neither identical with reason nor opposed to it, but *potentially* rational.”<sup>58</sup>

Kaufmann’s monistic reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy of power leads to a comparison with a philosopher who is generally considered quite different from Nietzsche in most respects – Hegel. Kaufmann identifies both Nietzsche and Hegel as metaphysical monists due to their shared belief that “...any duality has to be explained in terms of a single force.”<sup>59</sup> He goes on to claim that this means that these two philosophers are really quite similar in their general methodology, with the only real difference lying in the scope of their respective philosophic visions: “Some of the vast differences between Hegel and Nietzsche are at bottom, due to divergent emphases. Hegel always stressed the result of the process, the synthesis, and the larger unit, while Nietzsche concerned himself primarily with the negative and with the individual.”<sup>60</sup> To claim that Nietzsche and Hegel were engaged in the same basic project, with the only major difference being that Nietzsche pursued this project on the micro level while Hegel pursued it on the macro level, is a bold enough claim, but Kaufmann does not stop there. He goes on to argue that Nietzsche’s concept of how the will to power is used to control and overcome one’s baser impulses, which he calls sublimation, is the same as the Hegelian concept of sublation (*aufheben*). Kaufmann makes his case by pointing out that the German term Nietzsche uses, *sublimieren*, derives from the Latin root *sublimare*: “The Latin word in question, *sublimare*...means – in German – *aufheben*, and Nietzsche’s sublimation actually involves, no

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 242.

less than does Hegel's *aufheben*, a simultaneous preserving, canceling, and lifting up."<sup>61</sup>

Kaufmann's claim that the philosophies of Nietzsche and Hegel contain an identical concept at their core is a controversial one. Furthermore, he is basing his claim on an etymological argument which, because it relies upon the vagaries of linguistic development, is questionable at best in support of such bold assertions.<sup>62</sup> However, regardless of how valid Kaufmann's claim may or may not be, the similarities that he sees between these two philosophers are significant in light of the fact that the only other book devoted to a single philosopher that Kaufmann wrote was a study of Hegel. Clearly, he did see a strong connection between these two thinkers, and despite the dubious manner in which he tries to link them together, there is still evident creativity involved in perceiving these connections. Indeed, this kind of creativity is ultimately one of Kaufmann's great strengths as a commentator and interpreter.

As mentioned earlier, in Kaufmann's monistic reading of Nietzsche the will to power has the capacity to manifest itself as Dionysian passion or as Apollinian reason. These two manifestations can be understood to correspond to the spirited and rational parts of the classic tripartite theory of the soul as expounded by Plato in the *Republic*. But what of the third element in the Platonic model, the appetitive part? The only way that the will to power can work as a complete interpretation of life is if it is able to account for the most basic, pleasure-seeking component of the organism as well, especially since Kaufmann has been reading Nietzsche as a philosopher who wanted to get at the root cause of all human motivation and action. Power may be a plausible answer to a certain extent, but don't people ultimately desire power because it *feels good* to exert it? Someone as determined to get at psychological truths as Nietzsche would

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>62</sup> For a thorough and convincing refutation of this argument, see Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14-15.

seemingly have had to grant such a point, but Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche's theory means that power supersedes even the desire for pleasure: "Nietzsche's philosophy of power entails the repudiation of the pleasure principle as a moral standard: human actions are to be evaluated in terms of their conduciveness to power, or – the same in Nietzsche's eyes – in terms of the power they manifest."<sup>63</sup> Kaufmann then points out the interesting way in which Nietzsche's philosophy intersects with and then diverges from utilitarianism. Nietzsche promotes a vision of human life as basically a pursuit of happiness in the tradition of Aristotle, but he rejects the identification of happiness with mere "pleasure" as was done by the utilitarians. Of course, certain utilitarian philosophers such as John Stuart Mill argued that pleasure need not be associated only with base, sensual things. It could be associated with loftier and more sophisticated objects as well. Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche's philosophy of life as a pursuit of happiness in the form of power can also be modified such that "power" need not have the negative connotations often associated with it. There is no reason why "power" cannot be just as elastic of a term as "pleasure."<sup>64</sup> The kind of power which Kaufmann sees as Nietzsche's ideal is complete self-mastery and knowledge of oneself, and it is "...something to which pleasure and pain are only incidental."<sup>65</sup> One could imagine many ethical philosophers otherwise very different from Nietzsche able to consider this a noble goal.

### The Overman and Eternal Recurrence

In Kaufmann's construction of Nietzsche's philosophic vision, if the death of God is the initial insight that spurs on the project and the will to power is the fundamental hermeneutical tool, then the dual concepts of the overman and eternal recurrence are its culmination. The

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<sup>63</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 258.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

overman is Nietzsche's ideal, one who fully understands the implications of the death of God and exerts his own will to power constructively, and such an individual will naturally embrace eternal recurrence as the metaphysical worldview which corresponds to living in this way. Kaufmann grants that these two concepts do not initially seem as though they should go together, but he points out as significant the fact that they are mentioned in close proximity multiple times throughout Nietzsche's writings. Therefore, a faithful interpretation of Nietzsche's overall philosophy should regard them as intimately linked.<sup>66</sup>

One challenge to such an interpretation lies in the fact that these two concepts are most prominently featured in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's pseudo-religious text that, while it certainly contains much valuable philosophical content, is also particularly subject to misinterpretation due to its highly poetic and oftentimes incantatory mode of expression. Consequently, Kaufmann makes an effort to legitimize the idea of the overman by pointing out that it had been used by a number of other German writers before Nietzsche, most notably Goethe.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the explication of this concept is yet another opportunity for Kaufmann to stress Nietzsche's Goethean influences, which he does by drawing upon Nietzsche's account of Goethe towards the end of *Twilight of the Idols*:

He [the overman] has overcome his animal nature, organized the chaos of his passions, sublimated his impulses, and given style to his character – or, as Nietzsche said of Goethe: “he disciplined himself to wholeness, he *created* himself” and became “the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength,” “a spirit who has *become free*.”<sup>68</sup>

Kaufmann's Nietzsche-Goethe connection has now come full circle – Goethe is Nietzsche's ideal both in the form of Dionysus and in the form of the overman.<sup>69</sup> The phrase “not from weakness

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 307-308.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 316. See also *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 553-554.

<sup>69</sup> See above, 23-24.

but from strength” is particularly significant for Kaufmann’s interpretation of the overman. To relate it to the will to power, the overman is one who possesses an abundance of power but also refrains from using it. One passage from *Zarathustra* encapsulates this idea in an especially clear and concise way: “Of all evil I deem you capable: therefore I want the good from you. Verily, I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws.”<sup>70</sup> The overman is an individual who possesses abilities which will appear to most people as almost superhuman, but by definition the overman would never use these abilities to exploit or oppress other people, although he easily could. This kind of restraint and discipline is at the core of Kaufmann’s reading of the concept.<sup>71</sup>

While the overman is a concept which is easy enough to grasp as the ideal of Nietzsche’s revolutionary ethical worldview, the eternal recurrence is not quite as straightforward in its significance. It is mentioned throughout *Zarathustra*, but a slightly more accessible version of it occurs in aphorism 341 of *The Gay Science*. The question is posed - how would you react if a demon confronted you and told you that you would relive every moment of your life over and over for eternity? For many people, even those with relatively pleasant lives overall, this would

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<sup>70</sup> Thus Spoke Zarathustra in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 230.

<sup>71</sup> Kaufmann was the first translator of Nietzsche to render *Übermensch* as “overman” rather than as “superman,” and in his explication of the concept in his study of Nietzsche he is eager to distance this concept from the term “superman” for a variety of reasons. First and foremost among these is the fact that “superman” has certain connotations related to Nazi theories of racial superiority. Indeed, Kaufmann has an entire chapter discussing the misleading concept of “The Master Race” in Nietzsche’s philosophy, which I have omitted from this discussion because enough has been said elsewhere about Kaufmann’s efforts to divest Nietzsche of associations with the Third Reich. However, I think another reason Kaufmann is against the term “superman” is because of its associations with the fictional superhero of the same name who, despite first appearing in comic books in 1938 when the Nazis were at the height of power, was created by two Jewish young men from Cleveland. I see this as a missed opportunity, owing to general prejudices against popular culture which Kaufmann shared with many other intellectuals of his generation. Although Superman could be read as antithetical to the concept of overman because he abides by a traditional, socially-sanctioned moral code, in other ways he could be read as quite illustrative of what the overman represents on Kaufmann’s reading. Superman is a man with super-strength and other super-powers who could easily kill anyone, yet refrains from killing even the vilest of criminals. Doesn’t such a person exemplify exactly what Kaufmann and Nietzsche are talking about?



be a kind of hell, but what if one actually embraced such a scenario and lived one's life accordingly: "The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"<sup>72</sup> The idea here is a kind of radical affirmation. If you celebrate your action in a single moment, then you celebrate it eternally. The overman, being a well-integrated person whose being comes entirely through self-creation, would naturally celebrate this seemingly demonic scenario. As Kaufmann interprets it, the point here is not so much to choose actions that one can celebrate eternally, but rather to attain an affirmative state of mind. This is therefore one more way in which Nietzsche's ethics are similar to Aristotle's on Kaufmann's reading. He sees Nietzsche as promoting something like virtue ethics which emphasizes the *kind* of person one is over the specific things one does:

Particular actions seemed much less important to Nietzsche than the state of being of the whole man – and those who achieve self-perfection and affirm their own being and all eternity, backward and forward, have no thought of the morrow. They want an eternal recurrence out of the fullness of their delight in the moment. They do not deliberate how they should act to avoid unpleasant consequences – knowing all the while that whatever they are about to do has already been done by them an infinite number of times in the past.<sup>73</sup>

The eternal recurrence may seem like an esoteric metaphysical doctrine and, as Kaufmann points out, Nietzsche never offers any real argument in support of it.<sup>74</sup> However, within the context of this interpretation it is really just a corollary of Nietzsche's account of the overman and is meant to show the kind of perspective that such a powerful individual might have towards his own actions.

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<sup>72</sup> *The Gay Science*, 273-274.

<sup>73</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 322-323.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 326-327.

What is more intriguing for Kaufmann than the overall validity of the overman and eternal recurrence are the implications of these ideas regarding progress, which is one more way in which he shows Nietzsche to be decidedly anti-Romantic. The Romantic notion of progress as exemplified by Hegel's dialectical interpretation of history is antithetical to Nietzsche's overman because such an individual comes about not from a particular social order but in spite of any particular social order. The overman is almost by definition anti-social because of his inherent value independent of anything outside of himself: "For Nietzsche, the overman does not have instrumental value for the maintenance of society: he is valuable in himself because he embodies the state of being that has the only ultimate value there is; and society is censured insofar as it insists on conformity and impedes his development."<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche's account of the overman constitutes the supreme glorification of the individual over and against anything else. This idea is one of the primary reasons why Nietzsche is so often cited as a forerunner of existentialism along with Kierkegaard, who also stressed the importance of the individual against "the crowd." Coupled with the eternal recurrence, Kaufmann claims that "...Nietzsche's dual vision...glorifies the moment – 'all simultaneously' – and not progress."<sup>76</sup> It is the closest thing to a religious doctrine in Nietzsche's philosophy, even though it is posited as the outgrowth of the rejection of all traditional religious dogma.

### Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity

Now that the three main pillars of Kaufmann's interpretation of Nietzsche have been established, it is necessary to cover one more aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy that permeates Kaufmann's entire framework – his total repudiation of the Christian worldview. Kaufmann

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 313-314.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 329.

identifies Nietzsche as “...one of the first thinkers with a comprehensive philosophy to complete the break with religion.”<sup>77</sup> This may seem to be a surprising claim at first glance. Nietzsche was certainly not the first philosopher to identify as an atheist or to criticize religion. However, what Kaufmann is referring to is the fact that, while many secular philosophers had respected Jesus himself while criticizing the religion built around him, Nietzsche’s critique is aimed at both Christianity and Jesus as profoundly harmful models of human conduct. If this is the case, then such views go far beyond his predecessors.

Kaufmann outlines two main phases of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity: “...*faith versus action* and *faith versus reason*.”<sup>78</sup> The first phase has to do with the utter hypocrisy of what Christians say they believe compared to what they actually do and is similar in spirit to many other philosophers’ critiques, most notably Kierkegaard’s. It is related to Nietzsche’s genealogical analysis of slave morality as an ethical system derived from *ressentiment*. In the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche describes the way in which Christian morality came about from weak peoples’ hatred of the strong. In support of this he gives some infamous examples of quotations from prominent Christian thinkers such as Tertullian and Thomas Aquinas celebrating the torments of people who have been damned to hell as witnessed by the “blessed” up in heaven. Kaufmann describes the full implications of these descriptions for Nietzsche’s view of Christianity:

It may be objected that such quotations lend one-sided emphasis to what one might call all-too-human elements in the writings of the Christian fathers and saints. That is unquestionably true – *though there is more material of this sort than is generally expected* [my emphasis] – and one need hardly stress that Nietzsche himself has only scorn for such visions of heaven. The relevant point here is merely that when happiness is not pictured as the process of a struggle against suffering or as a creative activity, it will nevertheless not be defined as a pure state of pleasure from which pain is completely

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<sup>77</sup> *The Portable Nietzsche*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 342.

absent: when the overcoming of suffering is not conceived in terms of one's own exertions, it is apt to take the form of one's own triumphant elevation over the suffering of others. That, of course, seems to Nietzsche the mark of petty weakness – as does any aspiration to find one's own power through the oppression of others – and Nietzsche, admittedly fond of world-historical ironies, makes the most of such passages in Christian writers.<sup>79</sup>

I have italicized part of the above passage to show the way in which Kaufmann's own opinions are beginning to intrude into his account as he himself is being influenced by Nietzsche. He will elaborate upon many of these ideas in his own philosophical critique of religion. What is of primary importance here for Kaufmann is the way in which Nietzsche clearly laid out the psychological insight that much of so-called Christian morality is really just displaced anger that can potentially degenerate into outright vindictiveness and sadism. As Kaufmann puts it elsewhere, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity seeks to demonstrate "...the contrast between the original 'glad tidings' (evangel) and the resentful bourgeois morality that purports to be Christian even while it insists on throwing the first stone."<sup>80</sup>

This critique of Christianity in terms of the disparity between what is supposed to be the true faith and the way in which it is actually practiced is presented by Kaufmann through Nietzsche in an interesting and vivid manner, yet such a critique is a common one not just among atheists but also among Christians who criticize their own tradition from within. Indeed, such a critique was at the heart of the Reformation. However, Kaufmann points out that Nietzsche attacks the dominant strands of the Lutheran tradition as well. The primary source for this dimension of Nietzsche's critique is *The Antichrist*:

The very word "Christianity" is a misunderstanding: in truth, there was only *one* Christian, and he died on the cross. The "evangel" *died* on the cross. What has been called "evangel" from that moment was actually the opposite of that which *he* had lived: "*ill* tidings," a *dysangel*. It is false to the point of nonsense to find the mark of the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 275-276.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 337.

Christian in a “faith,” for instance, in the faith in redemption through Christ: only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross, is Christian.

Such a life is still possible today, for certain people even necessary: genuine, original Christianity will be possible at all times.<sup>81</sup>

Martin Luther’s response to the hypocrisy of Christendom was to conclude that Christianity was a religion based primarily on faith rather than on action, but Nietzsche draws the exact opposite conclusion based on the example of Jesus. Such misinterpretations go all the way back to Paul, the first person to learn the wrong lesson from Jesus’ life and create a misguided religion based upon it. As Kaufmann explains:

The Christian religion...seems to him [Nietzsche] to be founded on Paul’s denial of this proposition [genuine, original Christianity will be possible at all times] – a denial that Nietzsche would explain by saying that Paul knew that for *him* such a life was not possible. Nor was it possible for St. Augustine, Luther, or Calvin. Paul is for Nietzsche “*the first Christian*”; the discoverer of faith as a remedy against the incapacity for what one deems to be right action; the man who made it possible for pagans the world over to persist in their own way of life while calling themselves Christians.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, Christianity becomes a religion centered around an individual so singular and exceptional that nobody can truly follow his example, and faith becomes the way in which people are able to let themselves off the hook for not being able to measure up to this seemingly impossible standard. But Nietzsche claims that it is in fact entirely possible for people to live as Jesus did. Paul, along with many other prominent Christian thinkers and reformers after him, simply made the mistake of assuming that all of humanity was as flawed and weak-willed as he was.

As Kaufmann explains, Nietzsche’s denunciation of Christianity begins by pointing out the basic hypocrisy of claiming to believe something without this belief having any real impact upon the way one lives one’s life, but the heart of his critique has to do with the way in which the Christian notion of faith displaces reason as well. To contextualize this, Kaufmann cites Martin

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<sup>81</sup> *The Antichrist* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 612-613.

<sup>82</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 344.

Luther's admonition that "...a Christian should tear the eyes out of his reason" as the basic focal point of Nietzsche's ire.<sup>83</sup> Any worldview that would require someone to sacrifice reason to it is *prima facie* invalid in light of Nietzsche's own dedication to the pursuit of truth at any price.

This facet of his critique places him in the tradition of the religious skeptics of the Enlightenment, but Kaufmann points out that certain aspects of Nietzsche's own unique background come into play in his critique as well, specifically his earlier career as a philologist. Such a field is one which stresses a careful and critical methodology when dealing with older texts, and these sorts of considerations are completely ignored when Christians interpret the Bible:

For Nietzsche, there is no excuse for a double standard – for one set of principles for the exegesis of the Bible and another for the interpretation of other ancient texts. If the Christian approach to the Old Testament is at odds with the usual standards of philological and historical research – so much the worse for it.<sup>84</sup>

Once this kind of double standard is introduced when dealing with the interpretation of the Bible it can creep into other areas of intellectual endeavor, thereby devaluing truth itself. Kaufmann places a great emphasis upon Nietzsche's belief that when it comes to truth, there should not be any kind of unscientific standards for accepting the truth of something, such as strength of conviction or usefulness. Such a belief actually separates Nietzsche from many other philosophers with whom he is otherwise associated: "In his insistence that happiness and unhappiness are completely irrelevant to the truth of a proposition, Nietzsche is opposed not only to Pascal, the old Schelling, and Kierkegaard – who are fellow precursors of German existentialism – but also to William James."<sup>85</sup> The contrast with Kierkegaard is of particular interest in light of Kaufmann's later work on philosophy of religion which is highly critical of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 355.

the Danish philosopher. Kaufmann makes it clear that a concept like the Kierkegaardian notion of subjective truth is completely anathema to Nietzsche's philosophical position, and he himself comes down on Nietzsche's side concerning this issue.

In terms of the Christian religion, Kaufmann highlights Nietzsche's condemnation of its moral hypocrisy and unabashed celebration of the irrational, but perhaps most intriguing of all are Nietzsche's views concerning Jesus himself. As Nietzsche says in *The Antichrist*, he is concerned with "...the psychological type of the Redeemer."<sup>86</sup> The ensuing portrait of Jesus that is drawn in that work is highly nuanced and ambiguous, but Kaufmann interprets Nietzsche's overall assessment of Jesus as negative given Nietzsche's own philosophy of power: "This [Jesus] was not Nietzsche's ideal of the passionate man who controls his passions – nor, of course, an embodiment of the extirpation of the passions which Nietzsche associated with later Christianity – but a childlike state of freedom from the passions."<sup>87</sup> However, Kaufmann is also intent to highlight how ambivalent Nietzsche truly is towards the figure of Jesus, and how many aspects of Nietzsche's account are not as offensive as they may appear to be at first glance. Kaufmann points out that Nietzsche does have a certain amount of respect for Jesus, "...although what he has to say of Jesus is designed to shock any devoutly Christian reader."<sup>88</sup> Obviously, the mere title *The Antichrist* is one example of Nietzsche being deliberately provocative, but another instance is given a particular interpretation by Kaufmann which may not be immediately straightforward to many readers. Consider the following passage from *The Antichrist*:

To make a *hero* of Jesus! And even more, what a misunderstanding is the word "genius"! Our whole concept, our cultural concept, of "spirit" has no meaning whatever in the

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<sup>86</sup> *The Antichrist* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 600.

<sup>87</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 342.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

world in which Jesus lives. Spoken with the precision of a physiologist, even an entirely different word would still be more nearly fitting here – the word *idiot*.<sup>89</sup>

Kaufmann mentions that Nietzsche's sister made sure that those last three words were deleted from the original edition of *The Antichrist* and did not come to light until decades later.

However, he also points out that, given that Nietzsche makes a reference to Dostoevsky just a couple of pages later and that the word *idiot* is otherwise absent from Nietzsche's writings, he is clearly drawing a comparison between Jesus and Prince Myshkin, the innocent and childlike protagonist of *The Idiot*.<sup>90</sup> Whether or not this is a favorable comparison is another matter, but Nietzsche is clearly doing more than just hurling insults at Jesus. Nevertheless, Kaufmann makes it clear that Nietzsche does not consider the behavior of Jesus to be an admirable ideal towards which to strive, even if his actions exhibited a consistency and authenticity that his followers lacked. Jesus is ultimately far too passive for Nietzsche because he lacked any kind of will to power or true passions to be overcome.

### Kaufmann's Place within Nietzsche Scholarship

So far, I have attempted to outline Kaufmann's general approach to Nietzsche by providing an account of his overall methodology and interpretive framework. Now I shall consider Kaufmann himself more directly by looking at the way in which his study of Nietzsche was received and how he is regarded within the field of Nietzsche scholarship. To begin with, it should simply be observed that the sheer amount of attention given to Kaufmann's *Nietzsche* and the extent of its influence are quite unusual for the kind of book it is. Consider the assessment of Peter Gay:

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<sup>89</sup> *The Antichrist* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 601.

<sup>90</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 340-341. See also Kaufmann's footnote to this passage in *The Portable Nietzsche*.



Polemics about philosophers rarely reach a wider audience, but the academic world and to some extent even the interested general public read Kaufmann's intellectual biography with admiration and shame – admiration for the author's powerful defense of Nietzsche and his effective work of demolishing legends about him; shame for their own hasty and ill-informed verdicts on a thinker who apparently deserved their close and sympathetic attention far more than they had believed possible. It is safe to say that in the course of the twentieth century no American academic study has had a wider, and more fully deserved, impact than Kaufmann's *Nietzsche*.<sup>91</sup>

This is high praise indeed, and Stanley Corngold also speaks to this impact, placing special emphasis on its relation to other commentators when he observes, "Citations from Kaufmann function as a seal of authenticity, proof of a competent intellectual-historical awareness. He is so often quoted appreciatively – or attacked angrily – and presumably corrected – that all modern Nietzsche scholarship begins to read like so many footnotes to Kaufmann."<sup>92</sup> As can perhaps already be seen from these observations, the immensity of Kaufmann's influence can also be a double-edged sword. Alexander Nehamas points this out when he refers to Kaufmann's study as "...a book that everyone seems to be familiar with but few have actually read, as if, having succeeded in upending the traditional picture of Nietzsche, it can now be safely ignored."<sup>93</sup> What Nehamas is describing sounds like mere apathy towards Kaufmann, but there is much serious criticism attached to such attitudes as well. One such example of this is Richard Wolin:

The English-speaking world will long be in the debt of philosopher Walter Kaufmann, whose skillful editions and translations made Nietzsche's writings widely accessible. Yet, ultimately, Kaufmann's Nietzsche is remarkably un-Nietzschean. In his translations and commentaries, we are presented with a Nietzsche who is a cultured European, rather liberal and uncontroversial – all in all, a Nietzsche who resembles a mildly dyspeptic Voltaire.<sup>94</sup>

A less guarded instance of this same basic attitude comes from Michael Tanner:

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<sup>91</sup> From Peter Gay's Introduction to *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. & trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), xi-xii.

<sup>92</sup> Corngold, 11.

<sup>93</sup> From Alexander Nehamas' Foreword to the 2013 edition of Kaufmann's *Nietzsche*, ix.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 32.

[I]t was necessary that someone should come along and assert emphatically, with all the impressive learning that the research facilities of a modern university make possible, that all hitherto accepted views of Nietzsche were as remote from what he actually thought and wrote as the twentieth-century Churches are from Christ. Unfortunately that person was Walter Kaufmann, admirable as a translator but pernicious as a commentator. In his book *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, first published in 1950, and undergoing expansions in three subsequent editions, he peddled a view of Nietzsche which certainly eliminated any possibility of offence being given to anyone of liberal humanist outlook. Kaufmann was a Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, and his depiction of Nietzsche is that of a stimulating colleague, given to over-emphatic but essentially well-intentioned formulations of the views that any agreeable member of the department might be expected to hold about morality, race, freedom, and so on. More than that, by dint of extraordinary industry and ambition, Kaufmann established such a hegemony that subsequent writers on Nietzsche in the Anglo-American philosophical world either toed his line or were the recipients of savage reviews by him or one of his intellectual dependents. That depressing situation obtained until his death in 1980, and even now most writers on Nietzsche disagree with Kaufmann only circumspectly and after paying tribute to his inspiring work.<sup>95</sup>

Even Richard Schacht, a former student of Kaufmann whose writings overall demonstrate a great respect for him, remarks, “On reflection, it seems to me that our debt to Kaufmann is more for what he began and made possible – and even provoked – than for what he actually accomplished and left as enduring contributions to the English-language Nietzsche corpus and literature.”<sup>96</sup>

Whatever Schacht’s intention, he is damning his teacher with some very faint praise indeed.

It is not the aim of the present study to defend the overall validity and plausibility of Kaufmann’s interpretation of Nietzsche against these criticisms, but the fact that Kaufmann elicits these kinds of reactions is interesting in itself and suggests a certain trend that is worth exploring. One is reminded of William James’ famous remark about the stages of a theory: “First...a new theory is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves

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<sup>95</sup> Michael Tanner, “Organizing the Self and the World,” *Times Literary Supplement*, May 16, 1989, 519.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Schacht, “Translating Nietzsche: The Case of Kaufmann,” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 69.

discovered it.”<sup>97</sup> Taken as an aggregate, the responses to Kaufmann’s work seem to suggest that his interpretation of Nietzsche is somehow stuck in all three of these stages simultaneously, with an occasional begrudging expression of gratitude being thrown his way for at least getting the ball rolling on the serious study of Nietzsche. But is there a solid basis for this overall attitude, or is it merely a story that has developed around Kaufmann without any real proof?

### “The Walter Kaufmann Myth”

David Pickus reads the criticisms of Kaufmann’s work as indicative of a certain view that many other Nietzsche scholars have more or less tacitly agreed to, which he investigates at length in an intriguing article about this “myth.” As he explains, “My claim is that knowledge about what Kaufmann did and why he did it is not particularly empirical. Rather, it is an implicit, amorphous and emotional conviction based on points that ‘one’ simply knows.”<sup>98</sup> He attributes this disturbing phenomenon to “...a widely-held conviction among Nietzsche scholars that Kaufmann has received all the credit he deserves, perhaps too much of it, and that now is the time to balance the picture by pointing to some of his flaws.”<sup>99</sup> So at the outset, Pickus is contending that there is more at play here than simple disagreement among scholars. As was mentioned in the quote from Tanner above, Kaufmann’s work seems to have created a “hegemony” within Nietzsche studies such that he is viewed as *the* definitive interpreter and translator of Nietzsche. Consequently, the only way to break this hegemony is to take Kaufmann down from his pedestal.

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<sup>97</sup> William James, *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 572.

<sup>98</sup> Pickus, 228.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

The problem with this situation, as Pickus explains, is that taking down Kaufmann has generally amounted to offhand remarks and snide comments rather than any sustained critique of his work. Furthermore, the fact that Kaufmann did successfully distance Nietzsche from the Nazis and undo other prior abuses of misinterpretation is used by his critics to devalue every other aspect of his interpretation:

Clearly, other writers have defined it in a way that is less intellectual than the work they themselves are doing. As they tell it, Kaufmann was primarily engaged in the task of restoring Nietzsche's reputation, and this caused him to lose sight of the genuine issues that Nietzsche raised. For this reason, he softened or even distorted Nietzsche in unproductive ways. Citations of this sort are easy to find. They re-tell the story of how Kaufmann was primarily concerned with people thinking Nietzsche was fascist, and some judgment – laced with praise, derision or condescension, as the case may be – about how Nietzsche's true colors were thereby faded out.<sup>100</sup>

So, a large part of the “Walter Kaufmann myth” seems to be the notion that Kaufmann had a kind of monomania about debunking inaccurate information about Nietzsche such that the rest of his study should be viewed as suspect. Consequently, Kaufmann became just as much of a caricature as Nietzsche. Pickus is well aware of this parallel and sums up the similarities and differences, as well as what is really at stake here for Kaufmann's reputation:

The Kaufmann legend is less variegated than the Nietzsche one. It essentially has one story and one moral. Nevertheless, it can be comfortably adapted to fit all shades of Nietzsche scholarship. The one thing that all the negative, as well as lightly praising, comments have in common is the suggestion that Kaufmann lacked a coherent philosophy in the deeper and more genuine sense.<sup>101</sup>

Since the aim of the present study is to argue that Kaufmann did in fact have a coherent philosophy, it will be necessary to delve into this issue in more detail. To do so, I will look at a couple of instances of more sustained critiques of Kaufmann's work on Nietzsche and how they

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 232-233.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 235.

might shed light on the “myth” that has developed around him. I should also point out that, as of this writing, the examples that I will consider constitute almost the entirety of the field.

The first example, which is also considered by Pickus, is an article by Walter Sokel, “Political Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in Walter Kaufmann’s Image of Nietzsche.” This article is actually a paper presented at a conference and is quite brief at just over six pages, so even this can only be considered an “extended” critique of Kaufmann relatively speaking. Nevertheless, Sokel does make some interesting and penetrating remarks about how Kaufmann’s deemphasis of the political aspects of Nietzsche’s thought may have gone too far:

Political problems are posed by Nietzsche’s whole reasoning, and a decisive understanding of his thought, its relevance, and evaluation is bound up with the political dimension of it. However, Kaufmann removes the Will to Power from any important connection with political-social considerations. He does not pose the questions which his own emphasis on this element in Nietzsche’s thought elicits. The whole political dimension of this thought is bracketed out by Kaufmann. He considers Nietzsche to be an “a-political” thinker, although it was Nietzsche himself who doubted the possibility of such an animal.<sup>102</sup>

The basic thrust of Sokel’s argument is that Kaufmann’s distancing of Nietzsche from political concerns is very much related to the specific context in which he wrote his book, namely in America right after the Second World War. If Kaufmann had not had to worry about the sensitivities of his particular time and place, he could have created a richer and fuller picture of Nietzsche. Sokel’s points are well taken, but unfortunately his argument then goes horribly wrong when he analyzes Kaufmann’s monistic interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy of power and accuses him of adding a dualistic element to it:

Having first, and I think correctly, established a single yardstick of moral value based on degrees of power, Kaufmann now adds to this monism a second, dualistic element which is much less persuasive. He calls the quantitatively larger amount of power “true power”

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<sup>102</sup> Walter H. Sokel, “Political Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in Walter Kaufmann’s Image of Nietzsche,” *Nietzsche-Studien* Vol. 12 (1983), 438.

and distinguishes it qualitatively from lesser amounts of power which he calls “mere power”.<sup>103</sup>

As Pickus points out, the problem with Sokel’s claim here is as simple as it is devastating – Kaufmann never uses the phrase “mere power.” What Sokel is incorrectly citing here is actually “more power,” a phrase which *is* consistent with Kaufmann’s monistic reading of Nietzsche. Sokel’s entire argument is based upon the misreading of an “o” for an “e.”<sup>104</sup> Pickus actually goes out of his way to be charitable to Sokel’s argument even in light of such an oversight, yet is still forced to conclude, “...lest it seem like I am ignoring other, valid, points Sokel made, it should be noted that ‘the distinction between “mere power” and “true power” ascribed to Nietzsche’ is the *only* thing Sokel specifically discusses as being wrong with a claim Kaufmann made.”<sup>105</sup> What a difference a vowel makes.

The next example is an article by Thomas Jovanovski, “Critique of Walter Kaufmann’s ‘Nietzsche’s Attitude Toward Socrates.’” This piece is by far the longest critical article on Kaufmann and focuses entirely on Chapter 13 of Kaufmann’s book. In fact, it is ten pages longer than the chapter it is critiquing. Although he is not mentioned by Pickus, Jovanovski demonstrates a basic attitude consistent with the Walter Kaufmann myth. Consider the way that Jovanovski justifies his critical task vis-à-vis Kaufmann:

[T]he merit of having such a critique available in the literature – other than to dispel the pretensions, perpetrated by Kaufmann himself, that he is the only one who has grasped Nietzsche properly – is entailed by the fact that his *Nietzsche* not only served to bring home the challenge of that thinker’s writings to an unfriendly or at least oblivious Anglo-American readership, but *still serves* as a useful primer on him (Nietzsche).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>104</sup> Pickus, 245-246.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas Jovanovski, “Critique of Walter Kaufmann’s ‘Nietzsche’s Attitude Toward Socrates,’” *Nietzsche-Studien* Vol. 20 (1991), 331.

Jovanovski exhibits the same kind of ambivalence that readily acknowledges Kaufmann's influence while simultaneously resenting him for it. How exactly does Kaufmann perpetrate the pretensions he is accused of here? Jovanovski never says explicitly, but simply assumes that this fact is obvious. Nevertheless, this article is impressive as Jovanovski goes point-by-point through Kaufmann's argument about Nietzsche and Socrates and refutes every claim with scholastic precision, showing how Kaufmann distorts, misquotes, or misinterprets Nietzsche regarding this issue. One can draw two conclusions from this extended critique of one particular section of Kaufmann's account – on the one hand, if so many errors can be detected just in this one part of Kaufmann's book, the number of errors within the rest of the book must be legion. Maybe Jovanovski confined himself to this one part because to cover all the errors would have taken far too long. On the other hand, one could conclude that Jovanovski only critiques this one chapter because Kaufmann's account is otherwise unproblematic. Jovanovski seems to indicate that this is in fact the case at the end of his article:

[M]y insistence here that Kaufmann's interpretation of Nietzsche's Socrates cannot stand, by no means attempts to negate the recognition which should be given to the much broader aim and importance of his project: to repudiate the Nietzsche-myth that had long prevented a hearing for Nietzsche in English-speaking philosophy.<sup>107</sup>

He states his point even more directly when he says that "...my goal is not at all to undervalue Kaufmann's achievement in Nietzschean scholarship, but only to undermine his conception of a *Socratic Nietzsche*."<sup>108</sup> Jovanovski is only critiquing a small part of Kaufmann's work on Nietzsche, so even if all of his points are granted it is hardly damning to the project as a whole. I have omitted Kaufmann's discussion of Nietzsche and Socrates from this study because I find it to be ancillary to the overall framework Kaufmann creates for his Nietzsche interpretation, and if

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

it is as problematic as Jovanovski claims, then it would only be a distraction anyway. So, Jovanovski's critique of Kaufmann has a narrow enough focus that it can be bracketed out of the discussion.

The last example I will consider is an article by Richard Schacht which was cited above. Schacht focuses on Kaufmann's translations of Nietzsche rather than his study on him, but there is of course a close connection between the two. Many of the negative comments directed towards Kaufmann suggest, either implicitly or explicitly, that he may have stacked the deck in favor of his reading of Nietzsche by citing his own English renderings of Nietzsche's words in support of his arguments. So, Schacht is definitely addressing an important issue here, and in his close examination of Kaufmann's translations he makes a number of interesting and plausible observations. Schacht pays particular attention to Kaufmann's translations of the titles of Nietzsche's books. For instance, he finds *The Antichrist* to be an example of Kaufmann being just as provocative and incendiary as Nietzsche was, particularly since he chose not only to translate the title of one of his books in that way (rather than as *The Antichristian*), but also because he used it in the subtitle of his study on Nietzsche. Schacht observes: "Nietzsche himself often could not resist vivid language that invited caricature and misunderstanding; but it is not a virtue of Kaufmann as interpreter and translator to share the same susceptibility to rhetorical temptation."<sup>109</sup> Schacht also joins with many other critics by taking issue with the immense influence that Kaufmann has had on Nietzsche scholarship. He claims that by virtue of the particular works that Kaufmann chose to include in the bestselling *The Portable Nietzsche* as well as his choice to *not* translate a number of Nietzsche's books, Kaufmann defined the canon

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<sup>109</sup> Schacht, 70.



in an especially lopsided way.<sup>110</sup> But most interesting are Schacht's observations about the specific relationship between Kaufmann's translations and his interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy. At times, the two are in conflict: "Kaufmann rightly *describes* Nietzsche as a philosopher of 'experiments,' but he *translates* him in ways that make him come across as a philosopher of *doctrines*."<sup>111</sup> At other times, however, they are so closely intertwined that both are compromised:

[T]here are many cases in which he [Kaufmann] departs from fidelity to the German texts in ways that seem interpretively suspect and stylistically unnecessary. There are so many, in fact, that I have come to a sad conclusion: Kaufmann's translations cannot be assumed to be reliable – particularly when they suggest interpretive claims with respect to Nietzsche's views that depend upon the precise wording (and translational rendering) of particular passages from his texts.<sup>112</sup>

So, it would seem that in his dual role as both translator of and commentator on a philosopher, Kaufmann sometimes blurred the lines between the two in an unfortunate way.

Of the examples that have been considered, only Schacht deserves serious consideration in my view. However, even if we grant the validity of the points he makes, they have decisive impact more so for Nietzsche scholarship than for Kaufmann scholarship. What is important for the present study is merely the way in which his observations are related to Pickus' postulated Walter Kaufmann myth. Schacht's article came out nearly ten years after Pickus' discussion of the myth, so it does not fit chronologically with the trend that he describes. However, there is another, deeper sense in which it does not fit either. The tone of Schacht's article suggests that he does not have an axe to grind with Kaufmann, but rather is critiquing him only for the greater good of Nietzsche scholarship. I realize it is not always appropriate to consider tone in an

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

academic discussion, but I think in this case it is an important consideration in light of the particular way in which Pickus characterizes the Kaufmann myth. Kaufmann is certainly not immune from criticism with regard to his work on Nietzsche, but the point that Pickus is trying to make is that, if one looks at the actual record, he has barely received any. The many brief remarks and mentions of his name are indicative of an unfounded hostility towards his work and a refusal to engage seriously with it. It is also unfortunate that, since the examples that Pickus cites only date as far back as the 1980s, Kaufmann was not alive to respond to any of this. However, while he was alive there was one particular commentator on Nietzsche that he took issue with, and the nature of their disagreement sheds further light on the Kaufmann myth.

#### Kaufmann and Karl Jaspers

The attitudes directed towards Kaufmann that have been discussed so far have to do not merely with the validity of his interpretation of Nietzsche but also with his relationship to other interpreters of Nietzsche. As has been mentioned, there is the perception of a kind of aura surrounding him that suggests that he is the one true Nietzsche scholar, but this does not seem to have been a claim that he himself promoted. While the dominant narrative of intellectual history might suggest that Kaufmann was the messianic figure who brought Nietzsche to the English-speaking world, he appears to have been quite aware that he was not the first capable person on the scene, and this attitude is evident throughout the body of his study of Nietzsche as well as in the detailed commentary he attaches to his bibliography of secondary sources. To be sure, there are certain English language studies of Nietzsche that he subjects to heavy criticism, such as those of Crane Brinton and Arthur Danto.<sup>113</sup> However, he also points out a number of studies in

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<sup>113</sup> The problems with Brinton have already been mentioned, but it is worth noting a particularly cutting and amusing comment Kaufmann makes about Danto in a footnote on page 359 of *Nietzsche*: "...the level of his

his bibliography that he believes will be particularly helpful for students, and at one point he refers to "...the two most thorough and scholarly philosophic accounts of Nietzsche's thought" as those of George A. Morgan and Karl Jaspers.<sup>114</sup> Morgan's study is of some significance since it is an English language study of Nietzsche that predates Kaufmann's by nearly a decade.

Morgan states his aims at the beginning of his book:

The present study endeavors to discover the implicit wholeness of Nietzsche's thought as we may detect it through the shifting masks. But *is* there any whole? Almost everyone insists that Nietzsche perpetually contradicts himself. Is he not only unsystematic but deliberately anti-systematic? Only the sequel can answer these questions convincingly. But let us listen now to Nietzsche's own professions in the matter.<sup>115</sup>

Apart from some superficial differences in style, that sounds like it could be a quote from Kaufmann, so there is definitely some influence at work. However, although he does give lie to the claim that Kaufmann wrote the first major English language study of Nietzsche, Morgan is otherwise a minor figure within the history of philosophy. His career in the field effectively ended when he switched from academia to government service shortly after the publication of his book. On the other hand, Karl Jaspers was already a prominent philosopher when he wrote his German language study of Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: Einführung in das Verständnis seines Philosophierens* (translated as *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*). This book came out after Jaspers had published a number of his major philosophical works, including his three-volume *Philosophie* in which he explicated the main elements of his Existenzphilosophie. These facts point to the key differences between Jaspers and Kaufmann: Jaspers was in the later stages of his career and brought an established philosophical worldview to his study of Nietzsche, whereas Kaufmann was at the beginning of

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argument borders on the incredible. His book abounds in quotations, and he states that 'The translations, despite a merely adequate German, are all my own.' Adequate for what?"

<sup>114</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 218.

<sup>115</sup> George Allen Morgan, Jr., *What Nietzsche Means* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 21.

his career and was finding his own philosophical voice through the interpretation of another philosopher. This contrast adds added significance to the disagreements that they would have.

Jaspers begins his study by making some similar observations to Kaufmann concerning misconceptions about Nietzsche given the style in which he chose to express himself, such as when he observes that “[h]is thinking is neither *aphoristic* in the manner of the famous aphorists, with whom Nietzsche intentionally allied himself on one occasion, nor is it *systematic* in the sense of constituting a deliberately planned philosophical system.”<sup>116</sup> Part of Jaspers’ study also contains a long examination of Nietzsche’s life, embracing the same basic biographical approach as Kaufmann. In addition, the substance of Jaspers’ interpretation agrees with Kaufmann’s on certain points, particularly regarding the monistic reading of Nietzsche concerning his ideas about power when he says that “...Nietzsche...reduces all drives to a single one: the will to power. Thus he offers not only an account of a *multiplicity* of drives, but also a doctrine of *one single* basic force.”<sup>117</sup> However, the introductory sections of Jaspers’ work also contain various excurses on methodology which bespeak a much more fully fleshed-out philosophical framework than is present in Kaufmann’s study:

Genuine interpretation...does not subsume but penetrates; it does not claim to know with finality; but, while always taking cognizance of what has just been apprehended, it proceeds by a method of questioning and answering. It thereby begins a process of assimilation, the conditions and limits of which it determines for itself.<sup>118</sup>

For Jaspers, process is of primary importance with Nietzsche because, given the nature of his philosophy, there does not appear to be any real endpoint where the different elements of his

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<sup>116</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 3.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

thought can be effectively reconciled. This leads him to state one of his fundamental principles that will guide the entire interpretation:

All statements seem to be annulled by other statements. *Self-contradiction* is the fundamental ingredient in Nietzsche's thought. For nearly every single one of Nietzsche's judgments, one can also find an opposite. He gives the impression of having two opinions about everything. Consequently it is possible to quote Nietzsche at will in support of anything one happens to have in mind.<sup>119</sup>

Because of the contradictory nature of Nietzsche's philosophy, Jaspers claims that there is no way to ever gain an understanding of it as a totality. Consequently, for him the study of Nietzsche is a highly subjective affair which is not just contradictory but also ambiguous. Jaspers states that Nietzsche helps illuminate an important aspect of the fundamentally ambiguous nature of philosophical truth: "It is through ambiguity that the truth is protected from the unqualified."<sup>120</sup>

What is striking about these observations of Jaspers is how directly they conflict with Kaufmann. When Kaufmann talks about how to resolve "alleged contradictions" in Nietzsche, it is in the context of a discussion about Ernst Bertram, a pseudo-intellectual whom Kaufmann can dispose of quite easily, but such remarks can apply just as well to Jaspers even though he is a figure whom Kaufmann needs to take more seriously. Elsewhere, when Kaufmann says "Self-overcoming, *not ambiguity* [my emphasis], is the key to Nietzsche," he is phrasing his basic thesis statement in such a way that it would appear to be a direct rebuttal to Jaspers. In fact, after saying this Kaufmann goes on to claim that Jaspers partially recognizes this aspect of Nietzsche's thought but fails to see Nietzsche as having an established philosophical position that can be determined. Rather, Jaspers' interpretation of Nietzsche is as a thinker who is

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 19.

engaged in an ongoing activity of philosophizing, as indicated by the use of the term

*Philosophieren* rather than *Philosophie* in the title of his book.<sup>121</sup> Jaspers further describes this aspect of his interpretation in another, shorter work on Nietzsche:

Every word, every passing idea is part of his work. If he strays from his own best insights or slips into fanaticism or plays with extremes or with language, if thickets of surface manifestations grow rank in his sentences or the moment's passion makes him purposely unjust, we are the more conscious of his aberrations because everything Nietzsche jotted down (and was never able to submit to final critical review) is part of his work; and there is no way to separate it. Often his most essential and original ideas were preserved only in cursory notes. We must always be aware that we are not reading a finished achievement. We are in the thinker's workshop, where the solid product and innumerable bits and pieces come into existence simultaneously.<sup>122</sup>

This reading of Nietzsche as a philosopher always in the process of working out new ideas and never arriving at a finished system or unified vision seems to be at odds with the project that Kaufmann embarks upon in his study of Nietzsche. Yet, Kaufmann does recognize those aspects of Nietzsche that Jaspers is pointing out here as well. Compare the above passage with some observations Kaufmann makes in another work about the nature of Nietzsche's aphoristic style:

What condemned Nietzsche to writing long aphorisms...was an excess rather than a deficiency – perhaps even two excesses. The first was a superabundance of insights. Homer, being blind, can organize what he has seen and fashion it into a comprehensive epic. The philosopher who has gone blind has all his life to create his system. Nietzsche was a writer who kept seeing things while writing.

The other excess was in penetration. To cover an outline, neatly taking up each topic in turn, one must not see too deeply anywhere. In fact, it helps if one sees next to nothing: then one can apply a single insight – either one's own of many years ago or even that of another man who never thought of applying it in this manner – to one topic after another till the book is long enough or the system complete. If one sees deeply, a passage originally intended for one section will suddenly appear to be no less relevant to several other topics; and as this happens to passage after passage, the outline disintegrates, any hope of a system evaporates, and a series of long aphorisms appears.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 16.

<sup>122</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), 99-100.

<sup>123</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 14-15.

So, it would appear that Kaufmann and Jaspers are in at least partial agreement – they both recognize that the extreme fecundity of Nietzsche’s creativity and intellect meant that he was unable to restrict himself to the traditional philosophical style of a sustained inquiry on a single topic, leading to a more fragmentary, seemingly “unfinished” style. But where and how do they diverge, and what is at stake in their disagreement beyond a mere dispute within Nietzsche scholarship?

In his study, Kaufmann engages with Jaspers most directly in a passage which begins quite respectfully with high praise for his colleague but then quickly shifts into some rather harsh criticism:

In one of the best books yet written about Nietzsche, Jaspers tells us that the true alternative to merely nipping here and there in Nietzsche’s works and notes consists in nowhere being satisfied until we have “*also* found the contradiction.” This is decidedly not the line of least resistance; and Jaspers, believing that there are fundamental antinomies, sees a virtue in Nietzsche’s bold attempt to face such contradictions squarely. This, however, should not blind us to the fact that we are urged to adopt a wholly singular approach. We are to look, as it were, at the twenty-odd volumes of Nietzsche’s books and notes and compare statements picked at random: if we do that, we should always find contradictions. Our success, it would seem, depends on how far we carry this approach.<sup>124</sup>

Kaufmann is in agreement with Jaspers about the fact that Nietzsche is an unsystematic philosopher, yet he is in disagreement with him concerning what that means in terms of being able to derive distinct philosophical positions from his writings. At one point, Jaspers makes the observation, “In the end, the contradictory elements and circles in the movements of Nietzsche’s thought are simply the means to touch indirectly upon what lies beyond form, law, and the expressible. Nothing can be at this boundary, and yet everything must be there.”<sup>125</sup> This is fundamentally against Kaufmann’s view. Kaufmann goes into more detail about the specific

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<sup>124</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 74-75.

<sup>125</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, 155.

problems with this position in an essay included in a volume dedicated to Karl Jaspers in the Library of Living Philosophers series when he says that "...the question here is not one of one interpretation versus another: the charge...is that Jaspers' *method* is indefensible."<sup>126</sup> Kaufmann claims that the main problem with such a method is that it is circular and question-begging: "Jaspers' claim that concern with Nietzsche 'leads to no conclusion,' but only arouses the reader, is clearly a function of Jaspers' approach."<sup>127</sup> If one begins by assuming that Nietzsche's thought is an inchoate mass of contradictions, then of course it will be impossible to produce any kind of unified interpretation. Kaufmann on the other hand assumes that it is at least possible to overcome any contradictions that may be encountered by applying a certain methodology consistent with responsible scholarship. As objectionable as it may be to impose an artificial unity on Nietzsche's thought, Jaspers makes the mistake of going too far in the opposite direction by imposing an artificial disunity upon it.

However, there is something more at stake here in the disagreement between Kaufmann and Jaspers, and it relates back to the specific contexts in which these two men were writing. Kaufmann was writing about Nietzsche in America in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and it has often been pointed out that his de-Nazified and consequently "sanitized" version of Nietzsche is to a large extent a product of those particular circumstances. Jaspers, on the other hand, was writing about Nietzsche in Germany at the height of the Third Reich. For Kaufmann, this means that Jaspers' interpretation is a missed opportunity. As he explains, "It is tragic that even Jaspers should not have risen above the conception of 'ambiguity' which, although certainly at odds with Nazi versions, could scarcely become a rallying point of any

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<sup>126</sup> Walter Kaufmann, "Jaspers' Relation to Nietzsche" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York: Library of Living Philosophers, Tudor Publishing, 1957), 428.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.



opposition, nor do justice to Nietzsche.”<sup>128</sup> If Kaufmann was heavily influenced by his historical context, he sees Jaspers as being insufficiently influenced by his. Rather than use his position as a prominent and respected philosopher to speak out against the Nazi’s co-opting of Nietzsche, Jaspers chose a position far too moderate and vague to have any kind of real impact. As Pickus observes in an article dedicated solely to the Kaufmann-Jaspers relationship, “Kaufmann directly associated Jaspers’s technique with a wider failure of German intellectuals to mobilize critical reason during the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>129</sup> Kaufmann’s dispute with Jaspers therefore adds another layer of significance to what his own study of Nietzsche was really trying to achieve. Kaufmann clearly felt a responsibility to correct the record on Nietzsche that extended beyond mere academic scholarship. But it must also be kept in mind, contrary to an attitude quoted above by Tanner and Jovanovski in relation to the Walter Kaufmann myth, that the spirit of Kaufmann’s critique of Jaspers does not suggest that Kaufmann is out to maintain his status as *the one true interpreter of Nietzsche*. On the contrary, Kaufmann balances his criticisms with sincere praise:

It is thus the very excellence of Jaspers’ book which makes its faults important. He does not claim the poetic license of the architect of dialogues or sculptor of aphorisms, but presents us with a wonderfully learned full-length study and offers more direct quotations per page than any previous Nietzsche interpreter, invariably giving the page references, too. Use of an illicit method in such a serious work is doubly serious.<sup>130</sup>

So, the case of Kaufmann and Jaspers demonstrates that the notion that Kaufmann subjected all dissenting voices on Nietzsche to “savage reviews” can be dismissed as merely another aspect of the myth.

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<sup>128</sup> Kaufmann, “Jaspers’ Relation to Nietzsche,” 428.

<sup>129</sup> David Pickus, “Wishes of the Heart: Walter Kaufmann, Karl Jaspers, and Disposition in Nietzsche Scholarship,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 33 (Spring 2007), 11.

<sup>130</sup> Kaufmann, “Jaspers’ Relation to Nietzsche,” 428-429.

## Kaufmann Contra Nietzsche

The relationship between Kaufmann and Nietzsche is a unique one in the history of philosophy. It is hard to think of another case of a translator and commentator in the field of philosophy who is as closely associated with his subject matter, at least in the English-speaking world. As Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen observes, “For the last half-century, English-speaking readers of Nietzsche have been, first and foremost, readers of Kaufmann’s Nietzsche.”<sup>131</sup> As we have seen, what Kaufmann achieved vis-à-vis Nietzsche certainly opened him up to a lot of criticism, but if one looks closely at the specific content of the criticism, it is hard to see much there in terms of serious engagement with Kaufmann’s work. Furthermore, there may be a certain amount of envy involved. Critics of Kaufmann tend to see him as someone who was merely in the right place at the right time. As Pickus describes, “His efforts are alternately depreciated or praised in a condescending way that gives him credit for doing basic, non-complex labor.”<sup>132</sup> But Kaufmann was not just an obscure scholar who seized the opportunity of making a name for himself by popularizing a discredited philosopher. He happened to be uniquely suited for the task, not just because of his background as a German immigrant to the U.S., but also because of his education and drive, as David Rathbone observes:

It is in depth of erudition that Kaufmann shines brightest. Like Nietzsche himself, he has read Shakespeare, Swift, and Sterne, as well as Kant, Goethe, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and the Schlegels, Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, and Max Stirner, *actually* read them, and not just the secondary literature *about* them. Students are thus oriented by these stars of the philosophical firmament as they read Kaufmann, introduced to each, and directed by a standard of scholarship second to none. This is not to say that either Kaufmann or

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<sup>131</sup> Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and his Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 221.

<sup>132</sup> Pickus, “The Walter Kaufmann Myth,” 227.

Nietzsche ought to be followed unquestioningly; on the contrary, this is precisely what Nietzsche warns us against.<sup>133</sup>

If Kaufmann had not done the work he did to rehabilitate Nietzsche, perhaps someone else would have, but the point is that it *was* Kaufmann who did this work, and he brought his own unique talents to the task. What Kaufmann did was more than just something that anyone with a knowledge of the German language and the history of philosophy could have done.

However, even granting the value and uniqueness of Kaufmann's contributions to Nietzsche scholarship, it must also be kept in mind that he was more than a mere exegete. When writing on Nietzsche, "...he was writing as a philosopher, not as someone lower down on the discursive scale."<sup>134</sup> Even so, the nature of his project would seem to imply a strong sympathy with and inclination toward Nietzsche's philosophical views, but Kaufmann begins to find his own philosophical voice when he delineates a more nuanced relationship with his subject matter. In the preface to the third edition of his study he remarks, "I love Nietzsche's books but am no Nietzschean."<sup>135</sup> He states his scholarly motivations in more detail in the preface to the first edition: "The decision to write on Nietzsche...was not inspired by agreement with him. What seems admirable is his depreciation of the importance of agreement and his Socratic renunciation of any effort to stifle independent thinking."<sup>136</sup> What is interesting about this comment is that, while Kaufmann directly states his disagreement (or at least lack of agreement) with Nietzsche, he also at the same time implies that disagreeing with Nietzsche is in some sense an essential feature of being a true Nietzschean and thereby going beyond him. This is what Kaufmann actually does. This sentiment is crystallized in a key statement from the end of the first part of

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<sup>133</sup> David Rathbone, "Kaufmann's Nietzsche," in *Interpreting Nietzsche: Reception and Influence*, ed. Ashley Woodward (New York: Continuum, 2011), 63.

<sup>134</sup> Pickus, "The Walter Kaufmann Myth," 232.

<sup>135</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, vii.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* which Kaufmann refers to in his study: “One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil.”<sup>137</sup> So, although we must take into account Kaufmann’s own claims about his relationship to Nietzsche, we should also recognize that Kaufmann’s interpretation of Nietzsche heavily emphasizes the claim that simply agreeing with Nietzsche’s philosophical views is fundamentally against the overall spirit of his outlook. As Kaufmann points out, “What Nietzsche wanted desperately was a disciple who would be more than a disciple.”<sup>138</sup> Kaufmann *was* such a disciple: by way of Nietzsche he became un-Nietzschean. As we shall see, this method of taking insights from philosophers without committing to their general point of view is a hallmark of Kaufmann’s own critical philosophy of religion. But before delving into Kaufmann’s original work, it will be instructive to touch briefly upon two more instances of his role as commentator and the influences he drew from these as well.

### Kaufmann on Hegel

In his prolific career, Kaufmann wrote only one other book devoted to a single philosopher - *Hegel: A Reinterpretation*. Much less needs to be said about Kaufmann’s work on Hegel, yet it is interesting to consider it in relation to his work on Nietzsche. Unlike in the case of Nietzsche, Kaufmann was not heavily involved in the translating of Hegel’s works, but he did publish a companion volume to his study of Hegel in the form of an extensively annotated translation of the famous preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Even in this translation, one can discern some of the most important lessons Kaufmann learned from Hegel. One such lesson comes from the following sentence: *Das leichteste ist, was Gehalt und Gediegenheit hat, zu beurteilen, schwerer, es zu fassen, das schwerste, was beides vereinigt, seine Darstellung*

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<sup>137</sup> *Portable Nietzsche*, 190; Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 403.

<sup>138</sup> Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 47.

*hervorzubringen*. Kaufmann renders this as: “To judge that which has contents and workmanship is the easiest thing; to grasp it is more difficult; and what is most difficult is to combine both by producing an account of it.”<sup>139</sup> Aside from cleaning up some of Hegel’s awkward syntax, that’s a fairly straightforward translation, but more interesting is Kaufmann’s interpretive gloss:

External criticism that simply condemns without any prior effort to comprehend is relatively easy and trivial. To really grasp a position and the arguments involved in it is more difficult. But a philosopher must combine grasp and critical evaluation; for until we rethink every step critically we cannot fully comprehend what led a writer to go on as he did; what problems led him to develop his views; and what prompted later writers to differ with him.<sup>140</sup>

Kaufmann appears to have a great deal of reverence for this particular sentence of Hegel’s and the ideas that it conveys. He quotes it again in another work in the context of a more general discussion of philosophical methodology,<sup>141</sup> and Kaufmann also makes some remarks in the preface to his study of Hegel which begin by recognizing the forbidding nature of Hegel’s thought and seem to suggest a way to avoid the mistakes of other scholars:

When a philosopher is exceptionally difficult, most readers leave him alone or soon give up. The few who persevere and spend years figuring him out naturally do not like to be experts on something that is not worth while. So one is tempted to suspend criticism and concentrate on exegesis. (...) Comprehension without critical evaluation is impossible.<sup>142</sup>

Kaufmann appears to have internalized the basic message of that sentence from Hegel’s Preface and sees it as a useful way of avoiding the trap of becoming a mere exegete. Indeed, Kaufmann’s deft combination of exposition and criticism of other thinkers’ views is one of the primary ways in which he elevates himself from commentator to philosopher.

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<sup>139</sup> *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, trans. & ed. Walter Kaufmann (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 10.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>141</sup> Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, 25.

<sup>142</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), ix.

Kaufmann goes on to point out in his preface that "...the method of this book was dictated by its subject matter. I did not impose on Hegel a procedure that had worked on some other subject, say Nietzsche."<sup>143</sup> However, despite this disclaimer, Kaufmann's approach to Hegel does show many significant similarities to his approach to Nietzsche, albeit sometimes with lesser success. Kaufmann begins once again by considering the details of the life of his subject matter. In the case of Nietzsche, such considerations were important because elements of Nietzsche's life had become as controversial as his philosophy, whereas in the case of Hegel Kaufmann wants to show his readers the man behind the popular image of Hegel as a stuffy German academician, the *Herr Doktor Professor* par excellence. Kaufmann points out that this notion is actually the result of the conflating of Hegel with his immediate predecessor, Kant. He goes on to describe the interesting way in which Kant has come to be revered because of his relatively uneventful life, such that consequently "...it is extremely odd that what is true in his [Kant's] case and admitted not to affect the greatness of his merits is so widely assumed to diminish Hegel's stature and even to make him ridiculous, although in Hegel's case it is *not* true."<sup>144</sup> Just as in the case of Nietzsche, a certain legend has developed around Hegel that has prevented people from seriously engaging with the true content of his philosophy. While he is generally considered a Christian philosopher who sought to justify the political and religious status quo of his time through his writings, Kaufmann puts a particular focus upon Hegel's earlier period and points out that "...one should note *how* radical Hegel was in his early twenties."<sup>145</sup> For instance, in Hegel's early fragments he actually compares Socrates and Jesus as

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 34.

teachers and finds Jesus to be inferior.<sup>146</sup> Kaufmann describes how Hegel further develops this position in his early essay, “The Positivity of the Christian Religion”:

Instead of accepting...the conciliatory cliché that Jesus’ manner and teachings were humanistic, Hegel brings out, as few free-thinkers of the Enlightenment or the nineteenth century did, the “positive,” authoritarian, irrational, not purely moral aspects of Jesus’ manner and teaching. Hegel finds extenuating circumstances in the alleged rawness of Jesus’ Jewish audience – extenuating circumstances, not grounds for acquittal.<sup>147</sup>

With such a characterization, one can begin to see why Kaufmann chose to do as in-depth of a study on Hegel as he did on Nietzsche. Clearly, he saw an important connection between the two. Both of them were critics not just of Christianity and its untenable and hypocritical moral outlook, but also of Jesus himself.

Moving on from Hegel’s radical early period into the writing of his first full-length work, the *Phenomenology*, Kaufmann directly links events of Hegel’s life to his philosophical output by pointing out that Hegel had an illegitimate son named Ludwig who was born around this time. Kaufmann claims, “If one ignores him [Ludwig], one cannot really understand the state of mind in which Hegel wrote his first book,” further noting that this book “...was not written with a clear outline in mind, as if Hegel had known exactly what he proposed to do and then had done it.”<sup>148</sup> However, it is here that one begins to see the shortcomings of Kaufmann’s biographical approach. It is certainly a point of interest that the birth of Hegel’s illegitimate son and the writing of his first book coincided so closely, but Kaufmann does little with this information other than make a fairly forced analogy between the two in which the *Phenomenology* is considered the other “illegitimate” child because it turned into something so completely unexpected due to the rapidity with which it was written. Hegel may well have been influenced

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 92.

by these events in his life while he was writing, but Kaufmann's assertions here are all mere conjecture without any real scholarly argument to back it up. Nevertheless, Kaufmann is able to provide some insightful observations about the way in which the *Phenomenology* demonstrates the mindset of the man who wrote it. As in the case of Nietzsche, one common misconception about Hegel that Kaufmann is intent to disprove is the perception that he was a romantic. Such a characterization is far too narrow for Kaufmann's expansive portrait of Hegel, who sees him as not belonging to any one particular school, but rather as someone who "...sought to integrate Kant and romanticism in a single system."<sup>149</sup> But in the attempt to integrate all previous philosophies into his system, Kaufmann also sees a man who is at war with himself in many ways.

For Kaufmann, one of the primary internal conflicts of Hegel has to do with the style in which he chose to express himself. Kaufmann makes much of the fact that Hegel's early writings were quite clear and straightforward, which consequently means that the *Phenomenology* was the beginning of Hegel's tragic descent into an obscure and much more opaque writing style. Hegel's decision is presented by Kaufmann as being largely the result of the perception at the time that a brisk and engaging writing style was not appropriate for serious academic philosophy. Hegel's change in style was therefore completely intentional on his part: "Unlikely as it may sound, he was *not* unable to write clearly, but he felt that he must and should not write in the way in which he was gifted."<sup>150</sup> Kaufmann goes into greater detail on this point when he describes the way in which the text of the *Phenomenology* itself displays this battle that Hegel is having with himself:

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 99.



The preface to the *Phenomenology* is full of excellent aphorisms – a few of them quite naked and unconcealed, so no reader can miss them. To be sure, they are buried in mammoth paragraphs to forestall any popular appeal. The book is called *System of Science, First Part*, and the appearance of the pages is forbidding enough to frighten away browsers. But the reader who perseveres is brought up short every now and then by a striking epigram. The pity is that Hegel, too, is brought up short, shocked at his own unscientific manner, and intent on making amends immediately. But after a while it happens again. It is as if he wore a garment that did not fit: the buttons keep popping, revealing his chest and, as it were, baring his heart; but every time he stops to sew them on again before he feels free to make another move, though it keeps happening again. It never seems to occur to him to give up the garment as a bad fit that might conceivably suit someone else but obviously not him.<sup>151</sup>

The end of that passage conjures up an image of a silent film comedian such as Charlie Chaplin in his Tramp persona, which is appropriate because such an image is simultaneously comic and tragic. In Kaufmann's eyes, Hegel is a decidedly tragicomic figure.

One of the most interesting elements of Kaufmann's study is the way in which he further elaborates upon these initially tragicomic elements of Hegel's philosophical style and shows how they were harbingers of certain disturbing philosophical trends that would continue into the period when Kaufmann was writing. Kaufmann begins by comparing Hegel's philosophical work with that of great poets such as Goethe and Dante:

The Second Part of *Faust* and Hegel's *Phenomenology* are the creations of men as lonely as the exiled poet of the *Divine Comedy*. Unable to settle down with any real contentment in this world as it is, and despairing both of changing it and of finding solace in human society, Hegel, like Goethe and Dante, created a world of his own, and instead of peopling it largely with figments of his imagination as many another writer has done, found places in it for the men and women and events he knew from history and literature, as well as a very few of his contemporaries – and did not really care greatly how much of all this would be recognized and understood.<sup>152</sup>

Kaufmann is getting at the heart of one of the most challenging elements of Hegel's

*Phenomenology* - it is full of discussions of various philosophical positions such as "Stoicism,"

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 119.

“Skepticism,” or “the Enlightenment,” yet none of these quite correspond to actual historical phenomena but are rather Hegel’s own idiosyncratic readings of such concepts. Such references shift the emphasis from the exposition of a clear position that one can agree or disagree with to a struggle on the part of the reader for mere comprehension:

The highly allusive style turns the reader into a detective rather than a critical philosopher: one looks for clues and feels happy every time one has solved some small mystery; one feels that along with whoever else has figured things out one belongs on the author’s side as opposed to the many who have not got the point. The question whether the author is right drops from consciousness.

Thus allusions replace arguments. Instead of remaining a preliminary that is almost taken for granted, understanding, because it has become so exceedingly difficult, takes the place of critical evaluation for which no energy seems to be left. It is so hard to get the point, and so few do, that the big problem is no longer whether the point stands up but rather whether one has got it. And the main division is not between those who agree and those who do not, but between those who understand and belong and those who do not.<sup>153</sup>

Any student of philosophy who has attempted to read Hegel can tell you that he is difficult, but Kaufmann is trying to pinpoint the particular way in which Hegel is difficult and how it is fundamentally counterproductive to the philosophical ideal of the combination of understanding and critical evaluation mentioned in the Preface of the *Phenomenology*. If understanding itself becomes too formidable of a task, then it is all the more difficult for the task of critical evaluation and engagement to even get off the ground. Kaufmann sees the problems posed by Hegel in this respect as the beginning of a trend that would continue into 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy and reach its apex (or nadir) with Heidegger, a philosopher whom Kaufmann singles out for heavy criticism in many of his other writings.

Kaufmann further charts Hegel’s descent by linking it to details of his biography more successfully than in the previous instance when he describes a period in his life when, unable to

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 120.

get a position as a university professor, he became the headmaster of a secondary school in Nürnberg. Consequently, Hegel had to provide explanations of philosophy for younger students who were not necessarily going to specialize in it. One might think that such a situation would lead Hegel to adopt a clear and accessible style of expression, but Kaufmann describes the way in which it actually led to just the opposite:

Brevity coupled with the desire to say a great deal in few words leads to reliance on jargon and a style that borders on the oracular. And the attempt to give his students definitive formulations, coupled with the fact that the boys were nowhere near his own level, introduced a decidedly dogmatic note into Hegel's prose.<sup>154</sup>

This dogmatic tendency would permeate the latter part of Hegel's philosophical career, but Kaufmann is once again intent to correct certain "myths" about this period. Although Hegel's more systematic writings are presented as having a rigorously organized structure, Kaufmann argues that such a feature is far more illusory than real if one looks closely at the ongoing process behind these writings. For instance, Kaufmann devotes a lengthy section of his study to a detailed consideration of the table of contents of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, showing the outline of various sections of the first edition and then the differences in the revised version on facing pages. Kaufmann's purpose is to show that, despite Hegel's dogmatic mode of expression, nothing was ever truly settled within his philosophy. Whatever structure he established was always merely provisional:

Alas, it looks too neat. The poor man who was struggling to impose some order on excess and abundance created such an imposing appearance of neatness that readers who saw little but the table of contents assumed that the relentless progress upwards of which they had been told was plainly there, with "Objectivity" the plain antithesis of "Subjectivity," as if these two headings were not the most palpable afterthoughts.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 214.

One can see why Kaufmann specifically titled his study a “reinterpretation” of Hegel. To make the claim that Hegel is in fact an unsystematic philosopher is probably one of the most radical claims one could make about him, akin to claiming that Plato is actually a materialist. Yet, it also provides an interesting symmetry to his interpretation of Nietzsche. In that study, Kaufmann set out to demonstrate that Nietzsche is far more systematic than he appears, whereas here he wants to show that Hegel is far less systematic.

The relationship between Hegel and Nietzsche was already considered earlier when dealing with Kaufmann’s work on Nietzsche, but Kaufmann has some additional points to make when the primary focus is shifted to Hegel. Kaufmann compares the overall careers of both of them and observes that Hegel was radical in his youth and gradually became more conservative as he got older, whereas Nietzsche did the opposite, and their respective writings illustrate this. Furthermore, although it has become well known (largely through Kaufmann himself) that the reception of Nietzsche’s writings was marred by numerous cases of editorial interference, one could make the case that this was even more extreme in the case of the publication of Hegel’s writings:

After his death, Hegel’s works were edited by professors and other highly respectable men who had been his students. Yet his works were edited much more irresponsibly than Nietzsche’s, although the editing of Nietzsche has long been considered a scandal. That four words and an erroneous quotation were left out of *The Antichrist* when it was published in 1895 has been cited as proof of the perversion of Nietzsche by his editors, while the fact that scores of changes were made by Hegel’s editors, even in the books he himself had published, has excited no interest whatever, except among a very few Hegel scholars.<sup>156</sup>

This passage is almost humorous in the way that Kaufmann refers to his own work on Nietzsche as a foil to the claims that he is now making about Hegel, yet the point he is making is interesting

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 292-293.

and sheds even more light on the way in which Hegel is often referred to as the modern Aristotle. Just as many of Aristotle's works are not necessarily representative of his actual philosophical writing but rather are lecture notes for classes he was teaching, so many of Hegel's writings must be understood as being a product of his students and followers rather than of the man himself. Such a situation leads to just as much, if not more, misinterpretation than is the case of Nietzsche.

Kaufmann draws an even more illuminating comparison between the two thinkers in his *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, characterizing both as philosophical travelers. He begins by pointing out the strangeness of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, claiming that it "...represents the most sustained attempt ever made to show how different philosophic positions are merely stages in the life of the spirit. Yet the result is bizarre. For Hegel tries to deduce each stage in turn from the preceding one, and his deductions are often grotesque."<sup>157</sup> Kaufmann then goes on to bring Nietzsche into the discussion:

[W]here Hegel produced a painstaking log, allowing us to follow the stations of his Odyssey, Nietzsche's sharp vignettes often lack detail, as if he had flown rather than sailed and had found time only for rapid sketches. And sometimes it seems as if his papers had got mixed up to boot and were offered in random order. If Hegel doctored his log, Nietzsche seems to have kept none at all. If Hegel forces things into his system, Nietzsche writes like a man who wants to get things out of his system.<sup>158</sup>

This passage may shed more light on why Kaufmann chose Nietzsche and Hegel as the subjects of his two most focused philosophical studies than anything within the books themselves.

Despite the interesting connections Kaufmann draws between them, Nietzsche and Hegel seem like an unlikely pairing until one realizes that Kaufmann interprets them as representatives of two fundamentally different styles of pursuing philosophy, both of which have value. Hegel is all

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<sup>157</sup> *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, 11.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

about progress and development, whereas Nietzsche presents self-contained philosophical thoughts that often have no obvious connection to one another. A sensitive and penetrating philosophical mind should be able to appreciate and encompass both such eclectic influences, and Kaufmann strived to do just this within his own philosophical work.

Just as less needs to be said regarding Kaufmann's work on Hegel, the same goes for the reception of the book. Nevertheless, a couple of comments from reviewers are of interest. Walter Cerf, who gave a positive review to Kaufmann's book on Nietzsche, observes that there is a problem with the subject matter itself, given Kaufmann's overall approach and aims:

What Madison Avenue did for the Volkswagen, Walter Kaufmann had done in his *Nietzsche* (1950). He had rendered acceptable to a reluctant public a philosophical oddity which had the motor in the back when everything else had it in front. With his *Hegel*, Kaufmann is trying to do something similar for a tank, and his book succeeds in making some lethal parts of the tank look like comfortable chairs or as if they were not there at all.<sup>159</sup>

Cerf is claiming that Hegel is a philosopher who is just too inherently abstruse and difficult to be the subject of a study which tries to make him accessible and interesting to the general public. Such a task could not be accomplished without fundamentally distorting the content of Hegel's philosophy. The extent to which one agrees with this criticism depends upon whether or not one agrees with certain assumptions Cerf is making about Hegel, but a more substantive criticism comes from a longer article by Stephen D. Crites on Kaufmann's study that points out the limitations of his biographical approach which were briefly touched upon earlier:

In attempting to understand a philosopher of such ambitions intellectual biography can be of only limited assistance. A distinction must be made between the genetic and the essential, between the process of discovery and the articulation of vision, between the origins of his ideas, the false starts, lucky inspirations, experiments through which he struggles personally to bring them to fruition, and on the other hand the essential order of things which begins to emerge in his thought. Intellectual biography can be very

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<sup>159</sup> Walter Cerf, "Review," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (June 1968), 601-602.

revealing with respect to the former, and, of course, the latter is only logically independent of the former. But to comprehend and criticize the latter is a philosophical task, which requires of the critic that he approach the system with something like the methodological rigor which its author brought to its construction.<sup>160</sup>

Crites is saying that, by focusing upon certain details of Hegel's biography, Kaufmann undermines the philosophical content of his interpretation. Crites' general point here seems to me to be correct. Regardless of whether or not one considers Hegel to necessarily be a more *difficult* philosopher than Nietzsche, he is definitely a philosopher that requires a closer and more careful methodology when it comes to interpretation. Kaufmann's method of explaining certain features of Hegel's philosophy in terms of what he was going through in his life at the time detracts from attaining the kind of rigorous methodology that would otherwise be necessary.

When comparing Kaufmann's work on Hegel to his work on Nietzsche, the shortcomings ultimately come down to the fact that what worked in one case does not work as well in another. W.H. Walsh sums up the basic problem when he observes that Kaufmann "...pitches his own claims too high and correspondingly takes a low view of the work of his fellow commentators. His 'reinterpretation,' after all, is not quite new: something like it had been available in German since 1905, in French since 1929."<sup>161</sup> Hegel was already a canonical figure within the history of philosophy when Kaufmann wrote his study on him, so he wasn't performing the same kind of trail-blazing and pioneering role as in the case of Nietzsche, so if Kaufmann still sees himself as doing that kind of work then he is to some extent deluded. But it may also be the case that Kaufmann wasn't quite as invested in his work on Hegel either. He ends his study by remarking

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<sup>160</sup> Stephen D. Crites, "Review: A Critique of Kaufmann's Hegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April – June 1966), 304.

<sup>161</sup> W.H. Walsh, "Review," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (April 1967), 240. Unfortunately, Walsh doesn't specify which works he is referring to and my search of bibliographies of secondary sources on Hegel has not turned up any obvious candidates, but the basic point about there being a much richer literature on Hegel before Kaufmann wrote on him as compared to Nietzsche is clear enough and well taken.

of his subject, “Few will find their favorite philosopher in him. I, for one, do not. But there are not many who offer us so much.”<sup>162</sup> Although he never says so explicitly in his study of Nietzsche, one leaves that book with the impression that the subject of that study was at least *one* of Kaufmann’s favorite philosophers. Nevertheless, one could similarly say of Kaufmann’s study of Hegel that few people will find it to be the best study of Hegel, but that it is still valuable as a general introduction and overview of the philosopher.

### Kaufmann on Existentialism

In Kaufmann’s role as commentator and interpreter of other philosophers, there is one more area to consider, and it is one where his notoriety rivals even his status as a Nietzsche scholar. It involves work not on a single philosopher but rather on the general philosophical movement of existentialism. At the outset of this discussion it is of course necessary to highlight the problem with even referring to existentialism as a “movement.” Kaufmann himself describes the problem while also attempting to delineate what the loose association of philosophers associated with existentialism have in common: “The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life – that is the heart of existentialism.”<sup>163</sup> This description is from the opening essay of his anthology, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, which, like his study of Nietzsche, was unusually popular for the kind of book that it was. Pickus observes, “Judged by longevity and sheer sales, Kaufmann is the most successful editor of existentialist literature ever.”<sup>164</sup> But aside

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<sup>162</sup> Kaufmann, *Hegel*, 297.

<sup>163</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Penguin Group, 1975), 12.

<sup>164</sup> David Pickus, “Paperback Authenticity: Walter Kaufmann and Existentialism,” *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (April 2010), 17.



from its popularity, the book is also significant because, again like his work on Nietzsche, it played a primary role in exposing English speakers (primarily Americans) to philosophical ideas that had been largely confined to continental Europe. Pickus points out this dimension of the work and notes Kaufmann's unique importance in the history of ideas:

In considering existentialism's reception it is not enough to focus on the canonical authors alone. We must also consider those who introduced these writers to an English-speaking audience, and purveyed them to a mass market. This is particularly true when it comes to the question of anthologies, the central "delivery system" in making existentialist texts available. Walter Kaufmann especially is in a category of his own in this respect.<sup>165</sup>

High praise indeed, but we are once again confronted with the same problem that comes up in Kaufmann's other work as a commentator – even if everyone agrees that his work is important and historically significant, to what extent does it demonstrate his own originality and vision as a thinker and philosopher?

Before delving into this issue, it is necessary to contextualize Kaufmann's work within the time in which it came out. Despite the significance and enduring legacy of his anthology on existentialism, if one looks at the other books that were coming out around the same time it appears to have been part of a postwar American trend of the 1950s. Part of what this means is that, to draw yet another parallel with his work on Nietzsche, although Kaufmann's name may be closely associated with existentialism, he was definitely not the first person on the scene with a major study of it.<sup>166</sup> However, Kaufmann's book was the first true *anthology* of existentialist writings published in America. Furthermore, George Cotkin points out that since Kaufmann's

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Years before Kaufmann's anthology came out, there had already been popular books written on it by numerous American and German-American academics such as Marjorie Grene, Ralph Harper, Helmut Kuhn, Kurt Reinhardt, James Collins, and John Wild. Indeed, the books by Grene and Harper preceded Kaufmann's by nearly a decade. See Chapter 7, "The Canon of Existentialism," in George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) for the full story on the numerous books that shaped the American perception of existentialism in the 1950s and 1960s.

book came out somewhat after the initial rush of enthusiasm it has a different kind of significance: “Kaufmann’s anthology signaled a shift in the interpretation of existentialism. It disdained the moral and religious fervor that earlier anthologists had brought to their reading of existentialism.”<sup>167</sup> So although Kaufmann’s work was part of a flood of other books coming out at the time, he was concerned with demonstrating that existentialism was far more than just a trend. It was rather a genuine paradigm shift within the field of philosophy that deserved attention, and in order to support his case he assembled extended excerpts from a group of major philosophers and writers together to demonstrate the various facets of existential thought.

This leads into one of the most fascinating and significant issues in Kaufmann’s work on existentialism, which is the tension between the extent to which he is playing the role of a mere editor of an anthology who allows the writers in it to speak for themselves, and the extent to which he is acting as a philosopher putting forth his own interpretation of existentialism. Although his book is an anthology of other writers, it begins with a forty-page essay on existentialism by Kaufmann himself, and he does not avoid the inherent tension of his endeavor but rather confronts it head-on:

It may be best to begin with the story of existentialism before attempting further generalizations. An effort to tell this story with a positivist’s penchant for particulars and a relentless effort to suppress one’s individuality would only show that existentialism is completely uncongenial to the writer. This is not meant to be a defense of arbitrariness. A personal perspective may suggest one way of ordering diffuse materials, and be fruitful, if only by way of leading others to considered dissent.<sup>168</sup>

We have already seen how Kaufmann’s work on Nietzsche was criticized for seeming to be an authoritative and definitive interpretation of the philosopher even though Kaufmann made no such claims and even went so far as to point out that such claims would be anathema to the

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<sup>167</sup> George Cotkin, *Existential America*, 147.

<sup>168</sup> Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 12.

particular subject he was considering, and the same goes for his work on existentialism. Pickus effectively sums up this issue when he notes that "...it is not surprising that when he [Kaufmann] chose to present existentialism he produced a heady mixture of editorial rigor and personal standpoint, a product in accordance with his view of existentialism."<sup>169</sup> The last sentence of the passage quoted above in particular suggests that Kaufmann knows that an anthology is going to be a reflection of the editor's own interpretation of the material and as such is going to be highly controversial, but that is okay because this kind of work will at least spur other people to dispute it and engage in a dialogue with it. Kaufmann's picture of existentialism actually implies and even welcomes dissent. To do any less would be un-existentialist.

Moving on to the actual features of this picture, Kaufmann begins his anthology with a series of "proto-existentialists": writers who predate any kind of fully-formed existentialist ideas within the field of philosophy but who can still be considered as clear precursors for various reasons. The first of these is Dostoevsky, and Kaufmann includes the first part of *Notes from Underground* because, while Kaufmann grants that Dostoevsky is not an existentialist, he considers this piece to be "...the best overture for existentialism ever written."<sup>170</sup> The analogy of an overture is helpful, suggesting that Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* expresses all of the main themes of existentialism in an inchoate form and prepares us for what is to come next. Kaufmann's characterization of the *Underground Man* is also interesting and hearkens back to Kaufmann's commentary on other philosophers: "What we perceive is an unheard-of song of songs on individuality: not classical, not Biblical, and not at all romantic. No, individuality is not retouched, idealized, or holy; it is wretched and revolting, and yet, for all its misery, the highest

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<sup>169</sup> Pickus, "Paperback Authenticity," 18.

<sup>170</sup> Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 14.

good.”<sup>171</sup> So far, we have an insightful and penetrating analysis of the psychological type that Dostoevsky is portraying, but also note the dismissal of romanticism. Kaufmann goes on to further elucidate how completely opposed Dostoevsky’s worldview is from romanticism:

[T]he *Notes from Underground* are deeply unromantic. Nothing could be further from that softening of the contours which distinguished all romantics from the first attack on classicism to Novalis, Keats, and Wordsworth. Romanticism is flight from the present, whether into the past, the future, or another world, dreams, or, most often, a vague fog. It is self-deception. Romanticism yearns for deliverance from the cross of the Here and Now: it is willing to face anything but the facts.<sup>172</sup>

Kaufmann’s description of Romanticism here could be disputed, but one thing is now certain – Kaufmann is also deeply unromantic. So far, we have seen how he has taken pains to make it clear that Nietzsche (influenced by the non-romantic Goethe), Hegel, and now Dostoevsky are all fundamentally opposed to the romantic worldview, and this does not seem like a coincidence. Kaufmann clearly seems to be drawn to figures who either are clearly not romantic or who have been incorrectly perceived as romantic so that he can debunk such perceptions. However, one could also read Kaufmann as treating romanticism as a kind of straw-man position.

This becomes even more apparent in his discussion of the next proto-existentialist, Kierkegaard. As Kaufmann explains, “Kierkegaard escapes classification as a romantic because he, too, rejects the dim twilight of sentiment as well as any lovely synthesis of intellect and feeling, to insist on the absurdity of the beliefs which he accepts.”<sup>173</sup> The crucial problem which Kierkegaard brings to existentialism as Kaufmann sees it is the inescapable fact that human beings are faced with decisions throughout their lives, and it is impossible for us to ever have all of the necessary information to make such decisions: “Kierkegaard attacks the proud tradition of

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

theology, ethics, and metaphysics as a kind of whistling in the dark, as self-deception, as an unrelenting effort to conceal crucial decisions that we have made and must make behind a web of wholly secondary, and at times invalid, demonstrations.”<sup>174</sup> This strand within Kierkegaard’s thought seems to have had a strong impact on Kaufmann due to the fact that he would write extensively on this problem later on in his career, and in the process coin the term “decidophobia.” However, while Kaufmann recognizes Kierkegaard’s importance for the problem that he raises, he is less enamored with his solution of the “leap of faith.” Kaufmann describes the basic error that Kierkegaard makes regarding his critique of the philosophical tradition:

Instead of asking whether Descartes’ fine ideal that our reasoning should be clear and distinct, reinforced since by the tremendous progress of the sciences, might not eventually lead philosophers to concentrate on logic and trivialities to the neglect of large and certainly important areas, Kierkegaard rashly renounced clear and distinct thinking altogether.<sup>175</sup>

So, although Kierkegaard narrowly escapes the label of romantic because of his honesty in facing the problem of modernity head-on, he nevertheless falls back into irrationalism (and consequently a kind of romanticism) with his solution.

This brings Kaufmann back once again to Nietzsche, the last of these proto-existentialists, whom he includes in the anthology but with some heavy qualifications:

“Existentialism suggests only a single facet of Nietzsche’s multifarious influence, and to call him an existentialist means in all likelihood an insufficient appreciation of his full significance.”<sup>176</sup>

So, Nietzsche is clearly much more than *just* an existentialist, but including him in the volume alongside Kierkegaard allows him to demonstrate the Danish philosopher’s shortcomings even

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

more so by comparing him to a philosopher who avoided those same pitfalls. One of the great mysteries of the history of philosophy has been what Nietzsche would have thought of Kierkegaard, but Kaufmann seems to be pretty certain of the answer to that hypothetical:

To be sure, Nietzsche was, no less than Kierkegaard, an apostle of passion and a critic of hypocrisy, but he did not extol passion at the expense of reason, and he repudiated Christianity not because he considered it too rational but because he considered it the archenemy of reason; and his caustic critique of faith, both in the *Antichrist* and elsewhere, reads like a considered censure of Kierkegaard among others.<sup>177</sup>

Kaufmann is intent to disabuse his readers of the easy, superficial connections that could be made between these two thinkers. They certainly were both concerned with similar problems connected to the human condition, but their overall assessments of these issues were radically different. Kaufmann goes on to elaborate even further on how Nietzsche's connection to existentialism is much looser than has been previously supposed:

If we consider this striking preoccupation with failure, dread, and death one of the essential characteristics of existentialism, Nietzsche can no longer be included in this movement. The theme of suffering recurs often in his work, and he, too, concentrates attention on aspects of life which were often ignored in the nineteenth century; but he makes much less of dread and death than of man's cruelty, resentment, and hypocrisy – of the immorality that struts around masked as morality. It is not the somber and depressed moods that he stresses most but quite another state of mind which appears even much less often in the literature of the past: a “Dionysian” joy and exultation that says Yes to life not in a mood of dogged resolution, which is prominent in later German existentialism, but with love and laughter.<sup>178</sup>

This passage foreshadows Kaufmann's relatively low assessment of more recent existentialist thinkers, but it also raises the question of why Kaufmann is choosing to include Nietzsche in a book about existentialism at all. However, Kaufmann ends his section on Nietzsche with this pithy explanation: “Existentialism without Nietzsche would be almost like Thomism without

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 21.

Aristotle; but to call Nietzsche an existentialist is a little like calling Aristotle a Thomist.”<sup>179</sup> That seems a clear enough answer.

Kaufmann’s highly opinionated tour of existentialism continues with another figure with whom he has an already rich history: Karl Jaspers. Given the comments that Kaufmann makes about Jaspers in this essay, the question arises once again of why Kaufmann even included him in the anthology, not because he transcends existentialism as Nietzsche seems to, but because Kaufmann seems to have very little respect for Jaspers’ philosophical project at all. One clue is suggested by the fact that Kaufmann includes an essay by Jaspers about the close similarities between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche which seems to serve as a counterpoint to Kaufmann’s own views about the relationship between these two philosophers. Yet Kaufmann’s description of Jaspers’ interpretation is quite caustic:

To Jaspers the differences between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche seem much less important than that which they have in common. What mattered most to them, does not matter to Jaspers: he dismisses Kierkegaard’s “forced Christianity” no less than Nietzsche’s “forced anti-Christianity” as relatively unimportant; he discounts Nietzsche’s ideas as absurdities, and he does not heed Kierkegaard’s central opposition to philosophy.<sup>180</sup>

In other words, Jaspers’ interpretation depends upon ignoring the actual content of what both of these thinkers actually said. Indeed, Kaufmann goes on to describe Jaspers’ overall method of philosophy: “Any content is a mere means to transcend all contents. No statement has been understood until it is seen to be an invitation to be dissatisfied with all statements. ‘Philosophy’ is given up in favor of ‘philosophizing.’”<sup>181</sup> Kaufmann is taking up the same basic thrust of his argument against Jaspers’ interpretation of Nietzsche, which is that Jaspers dogmatically assumes that the *true* task of philosophy is the eternal wrestling with questions without ever

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 25.

arriving at any kind of settled answers. The problem for Kaufmann is that this has resulted in numerous lengthy books of unfocused and meandering writing.

Kaufmann is no less kind to the other contemporary German philosopher included in his anthology, Martin Heidegger. Indeed, the only real difference Kaufmann seems to see between Heidegger and Jaspers in terms of their overall value as philosophers is that Heidegger has a greater sense of showmanship, which is why he has ultimately had a much greater influence.

Here is Kaufmann's basic summation of Heidegger:

His critique of all traditional philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche, his insistence that all modern philosophic thinking is vitiated by Latin mistranslations of Greek words, and the demand that we must now recover the original experience of the earliest Greek thinkers, going back to the beginnings, communicates a sense of radicalism and occasionally even the excitement of an archaeological excavation.

As layer upon layer of misunderstanding is exposed, the reader feels that something glorious is about to come to view. Alas, it usually remains about to come to view.<sup>182</sup>

In another essay, Kaufmann expands upon this assessment with a further explanation of how Heidegger was able to have such a great impact upon the modern philosophical community:

Whether in conversation...or in a huge auditorium, lecturing to thousands, he created the expectation that something of the first importance was at stake and on the verge of discovery. When he entered a lecture hall, the atmosphere was charged, and though his large audience soon got lost and many people literally went to sleep, he always managed to regain their attention before he concluded with some intimation that, although everything was dark now, next time a great revelation was to be expected. And most of the audience always blamed itself for its failure to understand what he had said, and came back.<sup>183</sup>

This kind of highly ironic, even sarcastic description once again raises the question of why Kaufmann chose to include Heidegger in his anthology. But now Kaufmann's overall strategy in the construction of the volume is becoming clearer – he is not necessarily intent to showcase the

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>183</sup> Walter Kaufmann, "The Reception of Existentialism in the United States," in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays* (New York: Meridian, 1976), 104.



*best* examples of existentialist philosophy, but merely the most *representative*. He is assuming the role of both editor and philosopher, but he is content to confine his role of philosopher to the opening essay.

Kaufmann concludes this essay with a discussion of Jean-Paul Sartre, which is much more favorable than his estimations of his German contemporaries. As Kaufmann observes, there is a curious prejudice against Sartre which is of a piece with general perceptions of French intellectuals as not being *true* philosophers in the same way that Germans are: “Oddly, it is widely urged against him that he is in some ways strikingly unacademic, as if academic existentialism were not a contradiction in terms.”<sup>184</sup> Kaufmann is saying that Sartre’s more literary qualities as a writer are a strength rather than a weakness in the context of existentialism. Indeed, it allows him to break out of the narrow and arbitrary confines of his existentialist colleagues: “He [Sartre] has no fear of being taken for a man who writes psychology, and he does not consider it sub-philosophical to base discussions of despair, decision, dread, and self-deception on experience.”<sup>185</sup> After reading this essay, it is clear that Kaufmann regards existentialism as more than just philosophy, such that its most successful proponents (Nietzsche and Sartre) are those philosophers with a well-cultivated literary style, whereas academic philosophers (Jaspers and Heidegger) are least equipped to deal effectively with the issues brought forth by this loosely-defined philosophical movement.

However, it is also worth noting one major misstep that Kaufmann falls into in relation to Sartre, which may point to editorial overreach as well. One of the excerpts of Sartre included in the volume is an exposition of his concept of *mauvaise foi*, generally translated as “bad faith.”

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<sup>184</sup> *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 40.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

But Kaufmann elects to translate this as “self-deception” instead. This is all the more egregious in light of the fact that the selection in question is not Kaufmann’s translation at all, but rather Hazel Barnes’. Kaufmann simply alters the text by taking out the phrase “bad faith” and replacing it with his preferred “self-deception.” To be fair, he is completely transparent about this in the introductory remarks to the section and even gives an argument for why he did it, but this change in terminology reveals a real tone-deafness in Kaufmann’s otherwise quite eloquent style. It also sheds light on Richard Schacht’s criticism encountered earlier about Kaufmann’s occasionally dogmatic tendencies in rendering texts according to his own preferred interpretation of them.

Nevertheless, it is easy to see why Kaufmann’s anthology on existentialism was so successful. It offers a diverse selection of interesting philosophers and the introductory essay clearly demonstrates Kaufmann’s expertise on the subject. Although this work is much more noteworthy in Kaufmann’s oeuvre than his study of Hegel, there is not much more to be said about it because of Kaufmann’s minimal expression of his own views. Aside from a couple of other incidental essays which largely reiterate the points he made here, Kaufmann did not write much else on existentialism. Indeed, it seems to have been more of a side-project that he fell into because of his status as a German-American with unique insights into this transcontinental phenomenon of the postwar period. Still, his insights on the thinkers involved are valuable and are suggestive of certain directions he would go on to take in his own philosophical explorations.

## Chapter 2: Developing One's Voice - Kaufmann the Critic

Walter Kaufmann's earliest work is as a commentator and translator, yet his development into a philosopher in his own right does not appear to follow a straight linear path when one looks at the overall trajectory of his career. He would continue to produce translations and anthologies in conjunction with his original philosophical work throughout his life. Indeed, in the same year that one of Kaufmann's most important philosophical works, *The Faith of a Heretic* (1961), was published, he also managed to come out with a translation of Goethe's *Faust* and another anthology, *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*. Nevertheless, the year 1958 is important in the context of Kaufmann's philosophical development. At this point his study of Nietzsche, his anthology of Nietzsche's writings entitled *The Portable Nietzsche*, and his anthology of existentialist philosophers had already been published. If Kaufmann wrote nothing else, his name might still be recognizable to students of philosophy since these are three of his most influential and bestselling works. But then Kaufmann decided to write a work with the deceptively simple

and generic title *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. This work marks the true beginning of his own unique approach to the philosophy of religion.

Upon first glance, the most striking if also unsurprising features of Kaufmann's *Critique* are its stylistic similarities to Nietzsche. It is a discursive work with no single focus or emphasis, and Kaufmann organizes the text with chapters composed of separate sections labeled by number and subject heading. Yet, although it may appear that Kaufmann is mimicking Nietzsche's aphoristic style, this is in fact somewhat illusory. Within each chapter, and oftentimes across chapters, the sections lead into and build upon one another in a much more controlled way than generally happens in any of Nietzsche's writing, with the possible exception of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. But from this structure it is still clear that Kaufmann sees the value of Nietzsche's "problem-thinker" approach and prefers this more piecemeal method of philosophizing to an attempt to come up with some kind of grand, systematic vision.

Beyond these initial stylistic and methodological similarities, one can detect further Nietzschean influences in the way in which Kaufmann defines and characterizes his aims within the book. His preface consists of a number of different sections with subheadings addressed to different groups: "For All," "For Scholars," and "For the Curious." This would appear to be a deliberate echo of Nietzsche's subtitle to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "A Book for All and None." The sections addressed to scholars and to the curious warn against dipping into the book at random or taking certain sections out of context, a practice which Nietzsche was afraid would be done with his writings and which Kaufmann was keenly aware had in fact been done and with disastrous consequences. Kaufmann then goes on to make it clear that he is well aware of certain connotations associated with the word "critique" and he is intent to dispel these if he can. Critiquing something might imply a certain one-sidedness of philosophical approach, but as

Kaufmann explains, “We need not choose between disturbing and offering something positive. One can try to sustain a consistent positive outlook and define it in terms of a critique of idol upon idol.”<sup>1</sup> The stance Kaufmann adopts here is first of all an extrapolation of his work on Nietzsche as a “constructive refutation” of prior views, and it marks a further step in his development from commentator to philosopher. Just as Kaufmann wanted to make it clear in his analysis of Nietzsche that amid all the apparently negative bluster and rhetoric there was genuine positive philosophical content, he wants to make it clear that such is the case with his own work as well. Kaufmann also invokes the Kantian sense of critique when he further describes his use of the term as “...an effort not to debunk but to show the limits of what is criticized, what it can and cannot do, its value and abuses.”<sup>2</sup> So clearly the term “critique” has had an extensive and multifarious use within the history of philosophy, and Kaufmann is drawing upon a number of its different senses.

### Kaufmann’s View of Philosophy

In the first chapters of the *Critique* Kaufmann proceeds to define his own philosophic voice in a manner similar to many before him by assessing the current situation of philosophy as an academic discipline. Primary among his concerns is a tendency towards over-specialization. Contemporary practitioners of philosophy seem to be suffering from what Kaufmann sees as irrational and ungrounded fears of being contaminated by other disciplines. This leads to a general reluctance to deal with grand questions such as, what is a human being? As Kaufmann explains, “Today many philosophers would object that such an attempt would be psychology, not philosophy – as if there had ever been a great philosopher who did not offer a psychology and a

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

picture of man.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to further illustrate the absurdity of these views by considering the issue from the other side: “It would make far more sense to confront Freud’s conceptions of ego, id, and superego with the question: Is not that philosophy? But any such morbid fear of trespass across academic borderlines deserves disparagement.”<sup>4</sup> Philosophy needs to reclaim the broad, all-encompassing questions of human existence or else it will fade into mere academic pedantry. However, amidst this apparent encouragement of heady speculation Kaufmann also cautions against the temptation of creating a grand system that emphasizes one aspect of reality at the expense of all others. Such an endeavor might result in a certain amount of fame or attention, but it is also bound to be intellectually dishonest in some way. But then those who attempt a more nuanced and varied philosophical vision might find it difficult to achieve any notoriety whatsoever, such that philosophers are faced with a genuine dilemma of “...becoming either an Aristotelian, adding a few footnotes, or a heretic – radical, one-sided, and unsound.”<sup>5</sup>

This contrast between unfettered speculation and a more careful approach is related to a specific dichotomy within the field of philosophy which Kaufmann introduces with the observation, “What distinguishes philosophy is that it lives in the tension between challenge and analysis, between positivism and existentialism.”<sup>6</sup> These two terms, positivism and existentialism, point to a division between English-speaking philosophers and the philosophers of Continental Europe that eventually culminates in two very distinct camps, analytic philosophy and Continental philosophy. Kaufmann is writing at a time relatively early in the process of this split, yet he is still able to recognize that nothing good will come of this bifurcation. As he sees

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

it, analytic philosophy and existentialism<sup>7</sup> represent two recent revolts against traditional philosophical practice, but because each one is at the extreme end of the spectrum, they both suffer as a result. Analytic philosophy has a tendency to be excessively detached and thus not truly engaged with the problems with which it deals, whereas existentialism is oftentimes conceptually confused and de-emphasizes well-constructed arguments as a means of advancing ideas.

In order to further understand Kaufmann's critique of the excesses of these two schools, it will be instructive to consider an analogy he makes between philosophizing and mapmaking:

An accurate map may mislead us. All the highways may be there, but no indication that our car will be unable to make the grade at one point. Or we may have assumed that there were no trains when a cheap train could actually have got us to our destination in half the time. Often the author himself is unaware of what he omits.

Some of the most important philosophic criticism consists simply in determining what features a map portrays and what it leaves out.<sup>8</sup>

Going back to his critique, Kaufmann observes:

The analysts, continuing a long trend notable in British moral philosophy, have concentrated almost exclusively on habitual morality, avoiding moral perplexity, which is charged with emotion. Meanwhile, the existentialists leave out of account precisely what the analysts consider. Hence the difference in their maps.<sup>9</sup>

What the existentialists leave out is due to the fact that they "...concentrate almost exclusively on the most intense experiences."<sup>10</sup> So, analytic philosophy tends to map out human experience in terms of its more everyday, sometimes even trivial attributes, whereas existentialism focuses on the more extreme *Grenzsituationen* (limit situations), to use a term from Karl Jaspers. Each

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<sup>7</sup> In this discussion I will follow Kaufmann in using the term existentialism, since he is writing at a time before structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and other related philosophical movements had gained prominence in the intellectual climate of Continental Europe. But from a contemporary vantage point I think it is safe to say that Kaufmann's use of "existentialism" here can more or less be considered as a stand-in term for "Continental philosophy."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 47.

approach is partially right, which means that each approach is partially wrong as well, and both are ultimately incomplete and oftentimes misleading.

### Kaufmann's Theory of Truth, or Lack Thereof

So far, Kaufmann has indirectly given an idea of his philosophical outlook by outlining what he is reacting against, but he will now take a more direct approach in his articulation of a theory of truth which he can then use to evaluate various religious ideas. In this effort he continues to recognize a dichotomy within which he is trying to navigate and come up with some kind of golden mean between the extremes. Here the extremes are characterized as mere “correctness” versus a more poetic or artistic but also less precise kind of truth. Kaufmann resists taking sides but also makes an observation at the outset which significantly informs the rest of the discussion: “In philosophy we want to conduct our argument in such a way that any adversary, however brilliant, would have to concede our triumph. The demand for evidence and logical consistency – for truth, in short – introduces not only the desired difficulty but also this objective standard.”<sup>11</sup> This remark about standards of truth ultimately leading back to a desire to definitively win a debate might strike one as a bit glib, but one could also read it as Kaufmann's own restatement of David Hume's famous insight about reason being the slave of the passions. In addition, it is a way for Kaufmann to make clear that “truth” is not some kind of transcendental value handed down to us from on high. Rather, it is a concept created through human discourse that has different meanings in different contexts. No one meaning is better than another, just more suited to the context in question.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 64.



One of the most important aspects of Kaufmann's contextual theory of truth is its counsel against the standard view of truth and falsity as they relate to single propositions. Kaufmann is intent to point out that a single proposition is too small of a unit to be meaningfully considered as decisive in a philosophical discussion. Echoing some of the points Hegel makes in his Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kaufmann states: "Philosophic propositions are not self-explanatory: they point beyond themselves and must be evaluated in context. Even a whole paragraph or chapter points beyond itself to a larger context. Reverence for single propositions gives away the nonphilosophic reader."<sup>12</sup> It is quite easy to pick out provocative and seemingly controversial statements from a specific philosopher as evidence of the untenability of his or her philosophy, but this is an irresponsible method that can have oftentimes disastrous consequences. Indeed, we have already seen that Kaufmann began his career by rehabilitating the reputation of a philosopher on whom such an irresponsible method had been used repeatedly. Kaufmann goes on to describe how a proposition must be considered both in the context of the overall philosophical view of the writer and in the developmental context of the writer's overall career. In case his instructions here might strike one as a reiteration of basic principles of critical reading, he remarks, "All this will seem a matter of course only to those who have never read much theology or philosophic criticism. To give a single example: almost the entire Nietzsche literature flouts these rules."<sup>13</sup> This anticipates his upcoming critique of theology and demonstrates why he finds it so important to establish this theory of truth at the outset.

Kaufmann is oftentimes somewhat indirect and elliptical in his discussion of truth, not because he doubts that truth really exists, but rather because he is intent to show that most of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 72.

traditional philosophical theories of truth do not tell the full story. If he simply offered another straightforward theory of truth to rival these, he would presumably be committing the same error. Regarding established theories of truth within philosophy, two of the best known are the correspondence theory and the coherence theory. Kaufmann points out the way in which even considering these as two separate theories of truth is somewhat artificial: “All correspondence...is known through coherence: we have no second sight to see whether appearance and reality correspond, and if we would know whether a proposition is true we must see whether it is consistent with what else we know, with our other experiences.”<sup>14</sup> So an accurate account of truth has to take into account these multiple facets. The two theories considered “...want to capture truth in a moment and lock it up, although in fact neither correspondence nor coherence is given in a moment as a closed fact. Truth – even that of the Biblical God – is experienced by man only in time as a series of events, of promises fulfilled.”<sup>15</sup> So Kaufmann’s account of truth is not just contextual but holistic. The finer points of correctness and accuracy, which Kaufmann readily acknowledges as necessary although far from sufficient, need to be supplemented with a more general sense of trust and overall consistency.

Kaufmann concludes his discussion of truth with some considerations about the ways in which language tries but oftentimes fails to capture the full spectrum of human experience. Some of his remarks might strike one as playful and a bit tongue in cheek, but one should be reminded of a statement he makes in the preface in the form of a lesson to be learned from Socrates, “...that playfulness is quite compatible with seriousness.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, as much as Kaufmann

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 74. This insight is certainly not original to Kaufmann. Hegel made it as well, although probably never as clearly as Kaufmann states it here.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., xvii.

is critical of analytic philosophy, here he seems to be showing that he can actually engage in that same enterprise if he wants to, and perhaps with even more productive results. His discussion centers on the way in which language is fundamentally a convenient shorthand of communication through which we abstract from the ultimately irreducible and indescribable nature of our subjective experience. Here is one instance of Kaufmann describing this divide: “A noun is not the name of a thing but an attack on a thing: a noun tears a thing out of its environment, strips it of its defenses, and hales it into court for an indictment.”<sup>17</sup> Such a statement seems a bit over the top, yet it is of a piece with his discussion of contextual truth and his emphasis upon serious playfulness. Kaufmann’s point seems to be that, as far as truth and accuracy are concerned, language is a necessary evil. We obviously require it in order to communicate vital information to one another, but it will never fully capture all of human experience. This is thus a direct challenge to the main strands of analytic philosophy, namely logical positivism and all those who claim that philosophy should concern itself merely with linguistic confusions. Kaufmann desires philosophy to cover more ground than this if language is merely an artificial construct. Furthermore, this characterization of language is strongly reminiscent of the work of Wittgenstein, and it is no coincidence that Kaufmann had earlier described him quite admiringly as one of the rare modern philosophers who “...fused...the existential pathos and the analytic carefulness of Socrates,” and thus avoided the unhelpful dichotomies of the contemporary landscape.<sup>18</sup>

But how exactly are words attacks upon things they are supposed to describe? One of the most vivid cases of this that Kaufmann considers concerns the way in which we use language to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56.

describe emotion. Obviously, there are many instances of language being used to great effect to convey some kind of feeling, but most of the time such efforts require some interpretation. To just come out and describe one's emotional state as accurately as possible somehow misses the point:

Precision in describing emotions violates good form. When one is asked, "How d'you feel?" one is supposed to answer, "I'm feeling fine; how are you?" or possibly, "Not so hot." Even among the minority whose vocabulary is larger, accurate accounts of one's feelings are held to be in poor taste. One speaks of one's real feelings only after one has had too much to drink for accuracy.<sup>19</sup>

One could object that Kaufmann is merely describing the way in which precise emotional description violates certain cultural norms, all of which can perhaps be shown to be fairly arbitrary anyway, but there seems to be something deeper behind such norms, something uniquely human. Many who watch *Star Trek* have found that the coldly logical demeanor of Mr. Spock serves as an effective counterpoint to human characters from many different cultural backgrounds. Emotions simply resist the neat rational categories that language wants to give them, and certain emotions, such as love, have become so overused within language that their meaning has been significantly eroded, such that "...a word like 'love' does not name a sensation: it represents a triumph of abstraction."<sup>20</sup>

If language on its own distorts our experience and does violence to it, then what is left? Kaufmann acknowledges that words do nevertheless have some value and utility in describing human experience in terms of general categories, and gestures towards an area where an even more productive solution might be found:

The similarity between some such configurations, even those experienced by different people in different ages, is sufficient to make it extremely useful to employ a single word

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 83.

for anything that approximates certain public paradigms. These models are generally neither definitions nor the experiences of any individual. Often they are found in works of art.<sup>21</sup>

The introduction of the work of art as a category is of decisive significance for Kaufmann's philosophy of religion because he wants to trace religious beliefs back to the scriptures upon which they are originally based, almost all of which are works of poetry and therefore artistic creations in one way or another. The Hebrew scriptures represent at least one instance in which the same basic point Kaufmann is making about words doing violence to the things that they label is applied to the case of God Himself. God remains unnamed precisely as a way of according Him the utmost respect, although those who study these scriptures often take things to the opposite extreme: "Conversely, the scholar who writes 'Yahweh' tries to strip the God of the Old Testament of all his mystery, to cut him down to manageable size and make of him an object for manipulation."<sup>22</sup> This is once again an instance of Kaufmann either being playful, to give a charitable reading, or else putting too fine a point on an issue. Surely most Old Testament scholars who use "Yahweh" as a term do not have that kind of intentionality behind their usage, if indeed any do at all. Nevertheless, this is related to Kaufmann's larger point that discourse about God and religion in general has profoundly distorted many of the issues in question, and oftentimes the most prominent voices in these conversations are the least aware of the distortions that they are perpetrating.

### The Problem of Defining Religion

Moving on to Kaufmann's discussion of religion directly, he begins by considering that most perennial of questions within the philosophy of religion: how does one define religion? His

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 87.

response is reminiscent of that of the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno who begins an essay prompted by someone asking him to define what *his* religion is by stating that "...I am going to attempt, not to answer it, but to clarify the meaning of the question."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Kaufmann is not going to provide us with a straight answer to this question in the form of his own definition of religion, but rather he is going to consider a number of different attempts at answers and, in so doing, perhaps shed light upon the questionable enterprise of trying to "define" religion in the first place. First off, there are two kinds of pseudo-definitions that Kaufmann dispenses with at the outset, which he refers to as figurative and propagandist definitions. He describes figurative definitions as those which attempt to give some kind of poetic expression of what religion is without actually defining it with any kind of real precision, and then propagandist definitions are those which simply give some kind of loaded definition of religion that is meant to make us either sympathetic or hostile to it.<sup>24</sup> It is important that Kaufmann begins his discussion by addressing these kinds of attempts that might appear to have some kind of content but that upon closer inspection are quite empty so as to keep us on guard against them.

In terms of more serious attempts at defining religion, Kaufmann draws upon some categories established by the scholar James Leuba, which he classifies as "...intellectualistic, affectivistic, and voluntaristic or practical definitions."<sup>25</sup> Regarding the first category, it will be helpful to quote Kaufmann's entire initial evaluation:

The first type, understandably most popular among philosophers, defines religion as a kind of knowledge or identifies it with a body of propositions. The central shortcoming of these definitions is that they are one-sided and ignore the importance of emotion and of

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<sup>23</sup> Miguel Unamuno, *Perplexities and Paradoxes*, trans. Stuart Gross (New York: Philosophical Library), 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Critique*, 100-101.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

practices, both ritual and moral. Specific examples are open to further objections: most authors elevate their pet belief into the essence of religion.<sup>26</sup>

What is most interesting in these statements are Kaufmann's anti-philosophical sentiments in which he critiques the practice of philosophy for its one-dimensional analysis of phenomena. The most obvious manifestation of this is to view religion purely in terms of the intellectual content it offers, but the other categories of definition simply shift the focus while making the same mistake. Regarding the affectivistic category, Kaufmann singles out the famous example of Schleiermacher's definition of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence. Kaufmann claims that, as with the case of intellectual definitions, Schleiermacher is projecting a feature of his own specific outlook onto religion in general because "...the feeling of an absolute dependence is more prominent in Lutheranism than in most other religions."<sup>27</sup> In addition, Kaufmann, citing Freud, points out that it is not that feeling itself, but rather one's reaction to it, that determines whether or not one is religious: "The feeling Schleiermacher isolates is shared by religious and irreligious people."<sup>28</sup> The final category of practical definitions commits the same basic error as the first two by focusing purely upon rituals without any consideration of the interior life of the person performing the ritual. Kaufmann identifies this as an error commonly committed by anthropologists in particular.<sup>29</sup> He then concludes the discussion by claiming, "The chief lesson of a survey of attempted definitions of religion is that, in religion, practice, feeling, and belief are intertwined, and every definition that would see the essence of religion in just one of these facets is too partial."<sup>30</sup> So, the problem with the philosophical quest of locating the essence of religion goes back to the very way in which the question is framed. There is no one single "essence" of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Kaufmann cites section VI of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* to make this point.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

religion, and to assume that there must be at the outset is to distort the issue before one even begins.

## Religion and Truth

So much for the problems involved in even trying to define religion. But things continue to get more complicated when it comes to considering what is true within a religious context. Kaufmann identifies a common practice among many people of a religious background, which is a tendency to adopt a significantly different attitude towards truth in their own religion than in other areas of their life. As he explains, “If a man accepts a religious proposition as true, it is hardly ever after having first considered it as a hypothesis and found compelling evidence through an impartial inquiry.”<sup>31</sup> It could be pointed out that most people fail to follow this procedure for propositions of any kind, but there is at least a general understanding that one is relying upon the careful and methodical work of others in the case of historical or scientific propositions, for example. But in the case of religion this lack of scrutiny is all the more baffling for Kaufmann because these are issues that presumably relate to one’s eternal salvation. Wouldn’t it make more sense for people to study all religions and make an informed choice rather than rely unreflectively upon familial tradition or a sudden flash of inspiration?

Such a suggestion may seem untenable or simply unrealistic given the intellectual curiosity of the average person, but Kaufmann’s discussion here challenges us to ask why exactly this is so. Is it simply because this is not generally “the way things are done,” or is there something deeper going on? He suggests a possible answer to these concerns by further outlining

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 104-105.



the unique attitude taken towards the truth of religious propositions, which he likens to the counsel for the defense in legal proceedings:

In many countries the counsel for the defense is expected to use all his ingenuity as well as passionate appeals to the emotions to gain credence for a predetermined conclusion – namely, that his client is innocent. He may ignore some of the evidence if he can get away with it, and he is under no obligation to carry out investigations which are likely to discredit his conclusion. If, after all that, he cannot convince the jury of the truth of his position, he will saddle his opponent with the burden of disproof; and if necessary he will rest content with a reasonable doubt that his position *might* be true.<sup>32</sup>

Kaufmann's purpose in making this analogy is to show how problematic this attitude is when one looks more closely at the specific differences between the courtroom and religious belief. In a legal context, the mere fact that someone has been accused of a crime and put on trial creates the prejudice of guilt, in addition to the fact that the prosecutor works for the government. As Kaufmann goes on to explain, "Against such formidable odds the defense requires a handicap; and that is one reason why it is conceded the liberties that have been mentioned. In the case of religion, the situation is more nearly the opposite."<sup>33</sup> What Kaufmann means is that religion is by and large already part of the social establishment, yet it is accorded the kind of license that would only seem to be appropriate for a disenfranchised minority. How is fair and open intellectual discourse about religion possible if such a situation continues to obtain? This strategy of attempting to prove a position to be true by showing that it *might* possibly be the case and cannot be definitively *disproved* does not represent a different kind of truth but rather a different attitude towards the truth, and is an attitude which Kaufmann finds to be highly questionable given the purported importance of religious belief.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 106.

## Subjective Truth and Wishful Thinking – Kaufmann On Kierkegaard and William James

So far, Kaufmann has identified what he believes to be a mistaken attitude toward truth within a religious context, but the question still remains, might there not still be other kinds of truth beyond the conventional kind encountered within science, mathematics, history, or propositional logic? The only possible candidate that he considers is subjective truth, while also making his position on this issue quite clear at the outset: “‘Subjective’ truth is a fond nickname for self-deception.”<sup>34</sup> Kaufmann’s main target here is Kierkegaard, to whom he devotes an extensive treatment in *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, a collection of essays closely related to many of the points he makes in the *Critique*. Here Kaufmann considers Kierkegaard’s idea of truth as subjectivity which is developed in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Kierkegaard’s main purpose is to present a complete disanalogy between religious truth and ordinary truth. One of the primary ways in which he does this is by showing how Christianity is primarily based upon the absurd, which Kierkegaard explains thus:

The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being, inasmuch as all immediate recognizability is pre-Socratic paganism and from the Jewish point of view is idolatry.<sup>35</sup>

So, by definition, to be able to clearly recognize Jesus of Nazareth as God is to *not* believe in the truths of Christianity in any kind of conventional sense of belief as based upon some kind of evidence.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>35</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 210.

Kaufmann's point in his discussion of Kierkegaard is to demonstrate that the category of subjective truth is not a truly meaningful category with positive content distinct from objective or conventional truth. Rather, Kierkegaard merely falls victim to the same trap of taking a different attitude towards truth: "He presupposes the truth of Christianity and says in effect: we all believe these propositions to be true; the question is merely what attitude we should adopt toward them. Philosophy is entirely out of the picture: the choice is between sincerity and hypocrisy, black and white."<sup>36</sup> In so doing, Kierkegaard makes a virtue of the leap of faith, which really just amounts to believing something on incomplete evidence. When speaking of belief normally, one might think of it as a kind of continuum on which one approaches or moves away from believing in something based upon the amount and/or quality of the evidence. But such a view is anathema to Kierkegaard's characterization of genuine belief, as is evident from another statement from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "The almost probable, the probable, the to-a-high-degree and exceedingly probable – that he can almost know, or as good as know, to a higher degree and exceedingly almost *know* – but *believe* it, that cannot be done, for the absurd is precisely the object of faith and only that can be believed."<sup>37</sup> In his philosophy as a whole Kierkegaard seeks to demonstrate that belief in Christianity is qualitatively different from other kinds of belief because it is characterized by the absurd as a decisive break from conventional reality, but Kaufmann is intent to show that this kind of perspective is actually quite intellectually dishonest and even dangerous.

One way in which Kaufmann does this is to sharpen a distinction hinted at in the last Kierkegaard quote, that between knowledge and belief. The discussion of the difference between

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960), 194.

<sup>37</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 211.

these two terms has a long and interesting history within philosophy, which Kaufmann summarizes by pointing to the fundamental difference in the objects with which they were initially concerned: “Knowledge was held to be the apprehension of what is eternal and immutable, while belief was identified with apprehension of the changing objects of our sense experience.”<sup>38</sup> This was the original philosophical position of the earliest philosophers of ancient Greece, most notably Plato, which eventually underwent a quite dramatic change: “Christianity inverted this position. The Christian holds that knowledge is apprehension of changing sense objects, while belief alone can grasp what is eternal and immutable; and belief is held to be superior because it alone is certain.”<sup>39</sup> This observation puts Kaufmann’s critique of Kierkegaard in a slightly different light. Now, it would seem that Kaufmann sees Kierkegaard’s thought as merely a symptom of a larger problem inherent within the history of Christian thought, namely that the deck is inherently stacked against knowledge because of the way in which the terms are defined.

Kaufmann’s introduction of a dichotomy between knowledge and belief is interesting when one considers that the traditional philosophical definition of knowledge is that of “justified true belief.”<sup>40</sup> He acknowledges this when he says, “Belief has a wider sense in which it includes knowledge and a narrower sense in which it is contrasted with knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> Kaufmann wants to make it clear that when philosophers speak of knowledge as being preferable to belief, it is not merely a question of one being more certain than another, but rather that knowledge depends

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<sup>38</sup> *Critique*, 108-109.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>40</sup> First put forth most prominently in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Of course, this definition is not without its critics, most notably Edmund Gettier, who deserves at least a footnote mention in a discussion of this topic. But I think it is fair to say that Gettier’s critique of the JTB account of knowledge has been, if not thoroughly debunked, at least shown to be highly problematic in so many ways that it is not worth mentioning in detail here.

<sup>41</sup> *Critique*, 112.

upon evidence in a much more central and important way: “Belief in the narrow sense, in which it is contrasted with knowledge, is distinguished by the lack of evidence sufficient to compel the assent of every reasonable person.”<sup>42</sup> Now, one could certainly object that “evidence sufficient to compel the assent of every reasonable person” is about as loaded of a phrase as one could imagine, but Kaufmann puts it this way because he is willing to grant that beliefs, whether religious or otherwise, can certainly be based on evidence as well, just not necessarily the kind of evidence that is going to pass muster when considering what qualifies as knowledge.

In his discussion of belief versus knowledge and the different kinds of evidence that may be relevant to each, Kaufmann directs his attention to another philosopher whom he believes has been largely unhelpful in delineating the relationship between religion and truth, William James, and specifically towards “...his slipshod but celebrated essay on ‘The Will to Believe.’”<sup>43</sup> Kaufmann’s critique of James is even more severe and damning than his critique of Kierkegaard, but it is related to a number of similar problems. James basically makes an argument for his own version of a leap of faith when he distinguishes between two different attitudes, that of avoiding error at all cost and that of pursuing truth, and claims that the avoidance of error might actually get in the way of pursuing truth: “It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound.”<sup>44</sup> But Kaufmann claims that James is merely engaging in some intellectual sleight-of-hand:

James’ appeal depends entirely on blurring the distinction between those who hold out for 100 per cent proof in a matter in which any reasonable person rests content with, let us say, 90 per cent, and those who refuse to indulge in a belief which is supported only by the argument that after all it could conceivably be true.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>44</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1956), 19.

<sup>45</sup> *Critique*, 116.

There are many different varieties of people who wish to avoid error, and some of them may be far more reasonable and justified in their concerns than others. Kaufmann wants to demonstrate that by creating the Seek Truth/Avoid Error dichotomy, James has merely succeeded in completely caricaturing both positions, and also makes it abundantly clear which side he considers to be the more noble and correct position at the outset. This is merely another form of stacking the deck in favor of belief over knowledge.

Unlike Kierkegaard, who writes from the perspective of a specifically Christian writer and can therefore at least be expected to engage in paradoxical and elliptical phrasing at times, James approaches the issue from the presumably sober and “common-sense” perspective of a man of science, which is probably why he is treated to a far more thorough refutation by Kaufmann. His critique of James extends even to the apparently straightforward and precise terminology he uses to introduce the issue at the beginning of “The Will to Believe.” In his effort to define cases where we can justifiably believe in something on insufficient evidence, James claims that we must be confronted with a choice between two “live” options rather than options which are “dead,” using the image of live and dead wires to suggest choices that will succeed or fail at making an electric connection to one’s brain.<sup>46</sup> The image is certainly vivid and evocative, but Kaufmann points out that already such terminology is far from precise since “...one man’s live option is another man’s dead option[.]”<sup>47</sup> It could be granted that James himself also acknowledges as much:

If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature, - it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi’s followers), the hypothesis is among the mind’s possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual

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<sup>46</sup> James, 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Critique*, 116.

thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.<sup>48</sup>

While James does make a passing reference to the individual thinker, what he is really talking about regarding liveness and deadness in options is cultural differences. On the one hand, the point that James makes is clear enough, which is that people grow up in environments where they are exposed to a relatively limited array of worldviews, such that in most cases the possibilities outside of those are going to be so completely foreign and strange such that they don't truly constitute possibilities at all. On the other hand, the point that James is making is so obvious as to be almost tautological. Basically, in order for a belief to be one which someone could hold in the absence of sufficient evidence, it has to be a belief which that person would find to be plausible in some way. Does that even need to be stated? So, the live and dead terminology that James introduces is unnecessary and needlessly complicated. Kaufmann simplifies things by stating: "This first criterion can be stated in all fairness: the belief must tempt us."<sup>49</sup>

Kaufmann next takes issue with the second pair of terms that James considers – forced vs. avoidable:

Next, if I say to you: "Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it," I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, "Either love me or hate me," "Either call my theory true or call it false," your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, "Either accept this truth or go without it," I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> James, 2-3.

<sup>49</sup> *Critique*, 116.

<sup>50</sup> James, 3.

Kaufmann's response to this is as pithy as it is glib: "To satisfy criterion two, all I need is a little skill in phrasing."<sup>51</sup> But his basic point here is the same as in the first case – James introduces an apparently rigorous set of philosophical terms that actually amount to very little when it comes to illuminating the issue that he is dealing with. So far, a genuine option amounts to a choice between two things that one could conceivably choose and is phrased in such a way that one has to actually make a choice between them. Kaufmann makes no specific critique of the last pair of terms, momentous versus trivial, although there is implicitly the same basic problem here as in the case of live versus dead. One can assume that James would not waste time making a sustained philosophical argument about how one has a right to believe in things of a purely trivial nature, so again, to clarify that we are only talking about momentous choices is to engage in mere tautology.

Given these initial problems with terminology and conceptual confusion, Kaufmann's main critique of James' argument in "The Will to Believe" is that it is nothing more than an elaborate philosophical justification of wishful thinking.<sup>52</sup> If we have an important choice to make between two plausible alternatives, and we seemingly *have* to make it, then James basically gives us permission to go ahead and make a choice even if we don't have all the information at hand. We may be wrong, but James counsels us to take a different attitude towards this possibility: "Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf."<sup>53</sup> But Kaufmann once again explains

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<sup>51</sup> *Critique*, 116.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> James, 19.



how this false dichotomy that James has created is not only philosophically unhelpful but, even more surprising given James' background, psychologically fallacious:

It is a widespread fallacy that the alternative to the firm faith that we possess the truth must be weak indecision. It is quite possible to act with vigor, realizing that one might be wrong; especially, if one is sustained by the assurance that one's decision was conscientiously arrived at and that one is acting with integrity, though not infallibility.<sup>54</sup>

The point of view espoused by James has a long philosophical history, going back not only to Kierkegaard but to thinkers like Pascal and St. Augustine, which basically amounts to the idea that reason can only take us so far. At a certain point we must take a step into the unknown in order to have a truly meaningful and fulfilling life. This perspective is a prominent one within the existentialist tradition, which Kaufmann was certainly associated with in many ways, but this is one point at which he is intent to distance himself. He sees no justification for suddenly dispensing with reason in favor of a more expedient alternative. But getting back to the specific case of James the American pragmatist, Kaufmann sees this way of thinking as especially pernicious within his own adopted country:

What matters is not faith but effort; and that effort without faith that we shall succeed is either psychologically impossible or doomed to failure, while faith spells success, that is a myth which most Americans believe – without sufficient evidence. They do not bother to distinguish between hope and faith and are impervious to the glory of the hero who lacks both. But where success is esteemed higher than integrity, there can be no understanding of tragedy.<sup>55</sup>

In Kaufmann's view, it would seem that a direct line of influence can be drawn from James' argument to Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and other literature in the American self-help movement, even stretching to more modern instances like *The Secret* and the Law of Attraction. Of course, given his earlier work on Nietzsche, Kaufmann would probably be

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<sup>54</sup> *Critique*, 117.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* The last two sentences presage Kaufmann's later work on the significance of the specific worldview communicated by tragedy.

the first to point out that James is not responsible for the subsequent flood of ersatz philosophy that his work inspired, but nevertheless this undue emphasis on positivity and optimism is a genuine error that James commits, and Kaufmann feels that it must be recognized for what it is – a view that distorts and consequently deemphasizes the importance of *truth*.

### Different Kinds of Religious Propositions and Evidence

Now that Kaufmann has dealt with two philosophers he feels are responsible for distorting the conversation, he can return to the issue of the relationship between religion and truth more directly and develop his skeptical approach to religion in a more robust form. To accomplish this, he finds it necessary to pin down the meaningful content contained within religion in a precise way, so he engages in the Wittgensteinian task of categorizing religious propositions. His intent is not to provide an exhaustive taxonomy, but rather to demonstrate the thorny and problematic dynamic between religion and truth by pointing out the heterogeneity of the various statements made in its name.<sup>56</sup> He gives three examples of possible categories, of which the first is historical statements. These kinds of statements are quite straightforward when it comes to the kinds of evidence that would be used for or against them, namely, the same kind of evidence that is already well-established within the academic study of history. The problem is that the question inevitably arises, are they *merely* historical statements? When we read about a man named Jesus who lived in a particular place at a particular time, was arrested, put on trial, crucified, buried, and rose again, are we to treat this in the same way as we would all other historical events we read about? The problem that Kaufmann is hinting at here was also brought up in a well-known essay by Gotthold Lessing:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 120-124.

We all believe that an Alexander lived who in a short time conquered almost all of Asia. But who, on the basis of this belief, would risk anything of great, permanent worth, the loss of which would be irreparable? Who, in consequence of this belief, would forswear for ever all knowledge that conflicted with this belief? Certainly not I. Now I have no objection to raise against Alexander and his victory: but it might still be possible that the story as founded on a mere poem of Choerilus just as the ten-year siege of Troy depends on no better authority than Homer's poetry.<sup>57</sup>

In the first place, we simply do not possess the kind of historical evidence necessary to verify the historical statements that are put forth in the Bible. In the second place, even if we did, it still does not seem correct to say that Christians regard the events of the life of Jesus in the same way that they would other historical statements. Yet, what Kaufmann is trying to point out is that there is simply no other way to categorize them if we take them at face value, which seems to be the way they are put forth.

The second category that Kaufmann mentions are generalizations. These are perhaps a bit trickier to pin down than the first category, but one example that Kaufmann gives is "The Christian faith begets charity."<sup>58</sup> Again, taken at face value, this seems like a straightforward statement which one could verify or falsify on the basis of evidence. But problems inevitably arise if one points to certain cases where it would seem pretty clear that the Christian faith has not begotten charity. In the face of such criticism, a Christian might respond by saying, "Well, Christian faith *tends* to promote charity" or "You're taking the statement too literally." But again, as with the historical statements, how else is one supposed to take them? As Kaufmann explains, "...the impact of these statements depends upon their literal meaning. And to rely on

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<sup>57</sup> Gotthold Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power" in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Critique*, 123.

this when speaking from the pulpit, while resorting to qualifications in discussions with philosophers, does not spread a regard for intellectual integrity.”<sup>59</sup>

Finally, Kaufmann mentions the category of speculative propositions, an example of which would be, “Consciousness survives death.”<sup>60</sup> He does not go into detail about what kind of evidence would support this kind of statement, but he does make it clear that it would be a fundamentally different kind than would support a generalization or historical statement. In this instance it is unclear what Kaufmann is trying to say other than that the way to talk about the content of religious belief is far more problematic than has even been supposed in most philosophical discussions of it up until this point.

After thoroughly problematizing the religious propositions themselves, Kaufmann turns to the issue of what is considered to be evidence within a religious context, and he identifies two main examples – revelation and miracles. It is in this discussion that Kaufmann introduces a number of crucial themes that will characterize the development of his philosophy of religion from this point forward. One such theme is that of ambiguity. Although religious people often point to revelation or miracles as evidence of their beliefs, this presents a problem because there is not always widespread agreement about what constitutes a genuine instance of one or the other of these phenomena, even within a single religious tradition. Another theme is the inherently heretical nature of true religious visionaries in the time in which they live. In order to more clearly spell out the problems involved in this discussion, Kaufmann cites what he has found to be five common criteria in the literature for a true revelation: (1) subjective certainty, (2) the “fruits” of the revelation must be good, (3) it must not conflict with established doctrine, (4) it

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

must not conflict with reason, and (5) it must not be explainable in purely naturalistic terms.<sup>61</sup>

Kaufmann's point is that all of these criteria have their problems, but of special interest is his discussion of the third criterion:

[T]he revelation, to be genuine, must not conflict with an accepted body of tradition. This tradition, however, is in almost all cases sufficiently ambiguous to permit the great religious figures to cite tradition against tradition. Surely, this is what all the great religious figures have done: they were always opposed to much tradition. (...) In any case, this criterion is no help in the most crucial cases: in the case of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed it quite fails us.<sup>62</sup>

If one of the criteria of a genuine revelation would disqualify the central figure of all three major Abrahamic religions, then it might be fair to say that revelation as a concept is imperfectly defined. But Kaufmann doesn't stop there. He makes another observation:

If a man has an experience which seems to defy naturalistic explanation and he derives some firm belief from this, if this belief is not contrary to reason nor at variance with what we have believed all along, and if his conduct after this experience is agreeable or even admirable would this prove that he had a revelation? Those who believe in revelation would be among the first to say that it would not.<sup>63</sup>

What Kaufmann is saying is that these five seemingly reasonable criteria to determine a true revelation are a bunch of necessary conditions that somehow still do not add up to a sufficient condition. What is the deciding factor to add up to a sufficient condition in this case? Evidently nothing other than that a large enough number of people decide to regard the revelation as genuine. The case is largely the same with miracles. Kaufmann does not have much to add to David Hume's famous critique of miracles except to underline once again the central problem with evidence within a religious context: "A miracle requires faith: to those who lack faith it is

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 125-127. Kaufmann does not give specific references for any sources from which he is getting these other than a cursory mention of Thomas Aquinas and Paul Tillich regarding criterion four.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 127.

not a miracle. Appeal to miracles as evidence to prove beliefs is therefore circular.”<sup>64</sup> This is but one more instance of the strained relationship between religion and truth.

There is yet one more strategy commonly used in religious discourse which Kaufmann wants to bring to light and show to be problematic, and that is to make an inquiry into what causes someone to adopt a particular belief. Once again, here is a numbered list of the causes that Kaufmann provides in order to make his point:

1. Arguments exist to support the belief.
2. The belief was simply encountered, and nothing spoke against it.
3. The belief is not traceable to one source, simply in the environment, accepted by osmosis.
4. The belief fits in well with prior beliefs.
5. There are penalties for not accepting the belief.
6. There are positive rewards for accepting it.
7. Psychological gratification.<sup>65</sup>

Kaufmann’s conclusion is clear – only the first reason deserves any kind of consideration within a philosophical discussion. Every other reason is, while perhaps psychologically understandable, intellectually indefensible. This discussion brings Kaufmann back to the work of William James in order to approach the inherent problems of his method from a slightly different angle:

James’ apology for eccentric beliefs on the ground that after all they might conceivably be right, strikes at the roots of all intellectual discipline and the foundations of our civilization. When it came to his beloved “right to believe,” he failed to grasp the distinction between a legal right and an intellectual right. Legally, I have the right to believe not only without sufficient evidence but even what is demonstrably false; and many of us are prepared to defend this right. But intellectually I have no such right; intellectually it is not reputable: indeed, it is proof of my irrationality. And while a great

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 132-134.

deal can be said for tolerance of irrationality by the state, no less can be said against tolerance of irrationality by philosophers.<sup>66</sup>

This aspect of James' work is just one more way in which his regard for psychological factors gets in the way of responsible philosophical analysis. If there is a dividing line between the psychology of religion and the philosophy of religion for Kaufmann, it would seem to be the difference between explaining what is the case and delineating what should be the case.

### The Problem of the God of the Philosophers

Having outlined some of the main problems with the relationship between religion and truth, Kaufmann now turns his attention specifically to God and to the way in which philosophy has failed to engage with this object of religious belief in a productive way. He begins by stating the obvious fact that not all religions involve belief in God, and his reason for doing so is to combat a certain tendency among some theorists of religion, Rudolf Otto chief among them, to claim that human beings feel a natural inclination to believe in a god of some kind:

[M]ost statements about natural belief are simply false empirically; and that includes the allegations Rudolf Otto makes in his discussion of "The Holy as an *a priori* Category" in his important book on *The Idea of the Holy*. It is false that the belief that the world was created by a god, or the belief in God's omniscience and omnipotence, is inscribed in the heart of every man; and this claim remains false even if we add, as Otto does, "if he show any susceptibility for religious feeling" -unless this addition is meant to make this statement a tautology, which plainly is not Otto's purpose. It is the absence of natural belief that has led to the attempt to "prove" beliefs.<sup>67</sup>

As is oftentimes the case with Kaufmann, he brings up someone like Otto merely in order to quickly refute his ideas without devoting much space to a close reading or analysis, and one could certainly make the case that Otto's category of the numinous could account for even explicitly atheistic religions, but Kaufmann is if nothing else unambiguous in the way that he

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 139.

chooses to frame this issue. He says that any attempt to claim that belief in God is an inherent property within the psychology of human beings is directly contradicted by the facts, and this is ultimately the reason why so much time and effort within the philosophy of religion has been devoted to constructing arguments to prove God's existence. Otherwise, why would one need to prove something that everybody already naturally believed in?

Kaufmann now treats us to his own highly biased history of philosophy regarding this issue. He begins with Plato as the first philosopher to seriously put forth arguments for the existence of God. Kaufmann singles out for special examination the discussion in the tenth book of the *Laws*, which not only presents arguments for God (or the gods) but also explains why belief in God is so important within a civil society. What is of particular importance for Kaufmann in his discussion is the context in which Plato is arguing for God, which can be most clearly seen from a remark made near the beginning of the tenth book by the Athenian Stranger:

No one who believes in gods as the law directs ever voluntarily commits an unholy act or lets any lawless word pass his lips. If he does, it is because of one of three possible misapprehensions: either, as I said, he believes (1) the gods do not exist, or (2) that they exist but take no thought for the human race, or (3) that they are influenced by sacrifices and supplications and can easily be won over.<sup>68</sup>

This is the introduction of a general argument for why correct beliefs (orthodoxy) are so important for the state to maintain, and why those who do not have such beliefs must be corrected and, if necessary, punished by the state. As Kaufmann explains:

Thus he [Plato] formulated, centuries before Augustine and other Christians who were influenced by him, the false doctrine that faith begets good works and that without faith good works are impossible; and moreover he set a precedent by making quite clear that he did not mean faith in some vague, elusive sense: he furnished clear-cut formulations of

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<sup>68</sup> *Laws* 885b, trans. Trevor J. Saunders in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1542.



the propositions which must be believed and thus created the concept of dogma – and its counterpart, the concept of heresy.<sup>69</sup>

There are no doubt many ways that one could respond to the point that Kaufmann is making here. One could protest that the *Laws* was an unpublished work by the elderly Plato and should hardly be taken as representative of his major philosophical views. One could also point out that practical political suggestions were hardly Plato's forte. Even the earlier and much more well-known *Republic* is evidence of that. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that the Plato of the *Laws* has strayed very far from his teacher Socrates, who in one of Plato's earliest dialogues, the *Euthyphro*, shows a headstrong religious believer that he cannot even properly define what he is talking about. And it is nigh impossible to deny that the views that Plato espouses here did have a major and definite impact upon Christian thought.

One such impact can be seen in Plato's advocacy, through the character of the Athenian Stranger, of an Argument from Motion as a means of proving the existence of God. Kaufmann is certainly not the only person to see problems with this argument as put forth here,<sup>70</sup> but his critique goes beyond the mere problems in its structure to the way in which it has been treated by subsequent commentators and the consequent influence it has had upon philosophical discourse about God. The Athenian Stranger poses the following question and then answers it as a means of putting forth his argument:

‘Suppose the whole universe were somehow to coalesce and come to a standstill – the theory which most of our philosopher-fellows are actually bold enough to maintain – which of the motions we have enumerated would inevitably be the first to arise in it?’  
‘Self-generating motion, surely, because no antecedent impulse can ever be transmitted from something else in a situation where no antecedent impulse exists. Self-generating motion, then, is the source of all motions, and the primary force in both stationary and moving objects, and we shan't be able to avoid the conclusion that it is the most ancient

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<sup>69</sup> *Critique*, 140.

<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the article on the *Laws* in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes this argument as “obscure, difficult, and probably invalid.”

and the most potent of all changes, whereas the change which is produced by something else and is in turn transmitted to other objects, comes second.’<sup>71</sup>

After establishing that self-generating motion is where all other motion comes from, the Stranger goes on to establish that the only thing which is able to generate such motion is a soul, which means that all souls are divine and can be thought of as gods which animate the universe. Even though Plato’s argument leads to the positing of many gods, Kaufmann still regards it as committing the original sin of arguments for God in a monotheistic context as well, since “...the very argument that Plato used to prove that there are many gods was used by later writers to establish the existence of the one and only God. Some did not even bother to adapt it.”<sup>72</sup> As he goes on to further explain:

If we analyze this argument, we are immediately faced with a hidden premise; namely, that rest alone is natural while motion is in some sense unnatural and must be traced back, as it were, to some disturbance, to some force which started it. Many writers, including some of the best, feel that it is unfair to question any such presuppositions, and that the historian should make them explicit only to enable us to feel our way back into the spirit of the age. *This, we are told, is how men used to think; in those days they could not think otherwise.*<sup>73</sup> [my emphasis]

This is a continual complaint of Kaufmann, the notion that when certain writers and philosophers deal with religion sympathetically, they seem to get a kind of “free pass” from critics and commentators. Considering that Kaufmann began his career by writing on a philosopher who explicitly did *not* want disciples, he sees this as an especially annoying trend within the literature. Furthermore, the argument is essentially question-begging:

Even if we grant Plato the hidden premise which he needs, his argument is not compelling. He leaps to the conclusion that what moves itself must be a soul, and from the soul to god. His introduction of the soul is highly questionable, and his claim that all

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<sup>71</sup> *Laws* 895 a-b, 1551-1552.

<sup>72</sup> *Critique*, 143.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

these souls are gods lacks even plausibility – unless you happen to believe in gods before the argument begins.<sup>74</sup>

This is a recurring complaint for Kaufmann regarding philosophical arguments for the existence of God – if they are compelling at all, they only happen to be for people who already believe in God. One might complain that Kaufmann is missing the point, that arguments for God are not meant to convince atheists but are merely a way for believers to better understand what it is that they already believe. But what Kaufmann is trying to do in this section is to sketch out the way in which he thinks that philosophical discourse about God has become a closed system with its own unquestioned presuppositions, as well as the dangerous consequences that this has had for the history of philosophy.

This becomes all the more evident when Kaufmann directs his attention to Thomas Aquinas. As with Plato, the problems begin not even with the man himself, but with the way in which he is regarded within the secondary literature. Kaufmann identifies Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain as two modern commentators who have continued to perpetuate the myth of Aquinas as “...a man who was right about everything, or at least almost everything.”<sup>75</sup> As he elaborates further, “Throughout the work of Gilson and Maritain one can hardly fail to be struck by the vast difference between their treatment of Thomas and their often very cavalier criticisms of other philosophers. In that way, surely, Thomas’s superiority cannot possibly be established.”<sup>76</sup> This is not to say that Kaufmann regards Aquinas as a philosopher whose high reputation is undeserved. He actually speaks quite admiringly of the overall structure and achievement of the *Summa Theologica*, and his discussion of Aquinas is the longest sustained

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 144. Kaufmann does give one example of Gilson treating Hegel unfairly in his book *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, but it could be argued that this claim requires more references than that. Kaufmann’s track record of giving extensive textual references for grand statements is mixed at best.

section in his otherwise quite mercurial *Critique*. These facts would seem to indicate that Kaufmann does regard Aquinas as an important philosopher worthy of serious and careful study. But he also wants to properly contextualize the thought of Aquinas within the specific era in which it was written as a means of better understanding both its virtues and its numerous, oftentimes glossed-over vices.

The specific era in question was the 1200s, a time when the philosophy of Aristotle had recently been rediscovered and made accessible to Western European Christendom through Latin translations. As a full and comprehensive philosophical system put forth by a pre-Christian pagan, it posed a profound threat to the hegemony of the Catholic church at the time. So far, this is all uncontroversial and accepted fact within the conventional narrative of the history of philosophy. But it is now worth quoting in full Kaufmann's description of how Aquinas sought to solve this problem:

St. Thomas went forth, but did not slay the dragon [Aristotle]. He pulled its fangs and made it subservient to the church. That was a major part of his accomplishment but by no means all of it. After all, most theologians meet the philosophic fashions of the day, from Plato down to Heidegger, by trying to show that their religion has taught all along what now appears in a secular garb; and in the process of their demonstration they show that they have not really fully understood the philosophy with which they deal, and, most important, they transform their religion.

Aquinas differed from other theologians in several important respects. First, it was his good fortune that the rival in his time was no less a philosophy than Aristotle's. That alone made his attempt much more significant than the efforts of some contemporary theologians to assimilate Heidegger.

Secondly, even Aristotle himself was not a sufficient opponent for Aquinas. As he saw it, the dragon was reason itself; and the contest he tried to settle once and for all was the competition of reason and faith. He attempted nothing less than to pull the fangs of reason and to make it subservient to the church.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

Only through such a lengthy and uninterrupted quote can one begin to get a full sense of what Kaufmann is doing here. Setting aside the subtle dig at Heidegger, one can see a not so subtle dig at the practice of theology in general as an enterprise that tries to assimilate bodies of thought without really understanding them. However, Kaufmann sees Aquinas as unique in this respect. He was one of the few theologians that actually *did* have a good understanding of the philosophy that he absorbed into the Christian religion and was ambitious enough to go beyond the specifics of the philosophy itself to even try to absorb its underpinnings. However, Kaufmann also wants to show that Aquinas did ultimately commit the same error of his fellow theologians by failing to see just how much this importing of foreign content would alter the religion.

As but one example of this, Kaufmann considers Aquinas' version of the Argument from motion, the first of the Five Ways, and claims that this is an instance of Aristotelian metaphysics being awkwardly shoved into a religious context:

From a Christian point of view even Aristotle's *god* is not at all godlike; unmoved, he contemplates his own thoughts, unmindful of the world which he did not create, moving the things in the world by attraction, "as the beloved" moves the lover. Aristotle's god does not love. He is utterly unmoved, like a statue of the Buddha lost in contemplation that moves us to contemplate him. But in the following passages of the *Summa*, Aquinas, bit by bit, tries to prove that the unmoved mover of his first proof has the qualities which the church associates with the Christian God.<sup>78</sup>

Aquinas constructs a philosophical argument to prove that an "entity" exists. He calls this entity "God," but all he has really done is prove the existence of an abstract philosophical concept that bears little to no resemblance to what is encountered in scripture. "Clearly," Kaufmann writes, "the God of Aquinas' theology is not the God of Job, Moses, or Jesus."<sup>79</sup> Rather, it is this curious notion commonly referred to in the history of philosophy as the God of the Philosophers, a

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 161.

concept that can be grasped through reason but that is generally considered to be lacking when it comes to considering what the object of sincere religious faith should be. This point is especially important in the case that Kaufmann is continuing to build for the fundamental disconnect between traditional philosophical discourse about God and genuine religious commitment.

Considering Kaufmann's story so far, he identifies Plato as the first major philosopher to suggest the idea of some form of official religious belief enforced by the state, thereby introducing the concept of dogma and its opposite, heresy. Then in his discussion of Aquinas, he is intent to further illustrate the way in which this dichotomy came to have much more perilous consequences once the Christian worldview gained ascendancy. Kaufmann draws a comparison between Plato's ideas in the *Laws* about the punishment for heretics with Aquinas' views on the subject, which Aquinas outlines in Question 11 of Part Two of the Second Part of the *Summa Theologica*. At the end of the tenth book of the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger gives a long description of exactly how unbelievers should be punished, which involves serving a prison sentence of at least five years, and "When his imprisonment is over, a prisoner who appears to be enjoying mental health should go and live with sensible people; but if appearances turn out to have been deceptive, and he is reconvicted on a similar charge, *he should be punished by death.*"<sup>80</sup> In Article 3 of Question 11, Aquinas says the following regarding heretics:

On the part of the Church, however, there is mercy which looks to the conversion of the wanderer, wherefore she condemns not at once, but "after the first and second admonition," as the Apostle directs: after that, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer hoping for his conversion, looks to the salvation of others, by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Laws* 909a, 1565.

<sup>81</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 2.2, Question 11, Article 3.

Regarding this passage in relation to the earlier one, Kaufmann says: “The similarity [of Aquinas’ ideas] with the tenth book of Plato’s *Laws* is staggering; but what was there the musing of an old man without authority has here become the accepted practice of an enormously powerful church which rules over the lives and thoughts of millions.”<sup>82</sup> Plato was writing in the wake of his political failures at Syracuse, but Aquinas was writing at a time when the Church was politically triumphant. Of course, this also means that Aquinas was writing in the context of an already nearly seven-hundred year history of state-sanctioned punishment of heresy, dating all the way back to the Code of Emperor Justinian, so it is also important to keep in mind that none of these ideas were especially original to him. Given this situation, one could make the argument that Aquinas, like many other philosophers before and after him, was a man of his time, and although there is much in his writings that is profound and thoughtful, there are certain embarrassing and out-of-date views that he espoused as well, and it might be best to simply ignore these or at least not spend too much time examining them. In fact, when he makes reference to modern Thomism, Kaufmann describes the leading scholars of the field as basically doing just this.<sup>83</sup> But Kaufmann believes that this kind of attitude leads to a misleading and incorrect perspective regarding Aquinas, particularly if one considers his views on the question of heretics in the context of his overall system:

There is nothing vengeful in Thomas’ treatment of this question; he does not raise his voice when he gives reasons to justify the practice of the church in his day. But it would be a grave mistake to suppose that his argument in support of the Inquisition was an incidental all-too-human shortcoming which the saint shared with his age. Not only is it presented in exactly the same logical form as everything that has gone before, but what has gone before cannot be fully understood apart from the question “Whether Heretics Should Be Tolerated?”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Critique*, 150.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-149.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

There is a specific reason why Kaufmann spends so much time discussing Aquinas and highlighting these features of his philosophy, and it goes beyond a mere self-righteous crusade of wanting to point out the embarrassing and ugly anachronisms of the most distinguished philosopher of the Catholic tradition. He wants to show that Aquinas used his brilliance to give philosophical sanction to the punishment of heretics, and in so doing Kaufmann seeks to define his own position of celebrating heresy in opposition to it. Kaufmann acknowledges Aquinas as a figure who made massive contributions to the history of philosophy, but of a very specific kind:

Thomas' greatness was not the greatness of Amos and Isaiah, who defied the religious institutions of their day, pitting their moral convictions against the age and attacking the conscience of the time like a storm that breaks down walls and exalts life and spirit above convention and belief. Aquinas gave all to his church, fortified its conscience, built imposing walls to protect it against storms, and was canonized."<sup>85</sup>

Kaufmann sees Aquinas and the elderly Plato before him as the ultimate anti-heretics, and because such a tradition has become ingrained within the philosophical tradition through these two towering figures, Kaufmann sees it as all the more important to promote an opposing view.

Kaufmann considers a couple more interesting episodes in the history of arguments for the existence of God more briefly, again with the purpose not so much of refuting them (although he certainly makes an effort at doing that as well) but rather of showing the fundamental disconnect between philosophical discourse about God and the view of religion that he is trying to develop, albeit still in an inchoate form in this work. When considering Anselm's Ontological Argument from the *Proslogion*, Kaufmann begins by acknowledging that Anselm introduces the argument with a prayer and is concerned not with proving God's existence to a nonbeliever but rather with understanding what it is that he himself believes. But Kaufmann is also quick to point out that, no matter how Anselm's argument is contextualized, its premises are

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 150.



incoherent philosophically speaking. Considering the first premise, God is a perfect being, Kaufmann claims that this is essentially a meaningless phrase because perfection has no meaning unless it is applied to a specific purpose: “The greater the level of generality is, the less sense does it make to speak of perfection; and being is probably the most general term we have.”<sup>86</sup> The second move of the argument, meant to demonstrate that God as a perfect being *must* exist because it is better to exist in reality than merely as an idea, is even easier for Kaufmann to dispose of by simply noting that this premise “...rests on the assumption that existence is, to put it crudely, a good thing. A Hindu or a Buddhist might well question this.”<sup>87</sup> One could even fortify Kaufmann’s critique here by pointing out that there is a tradition of skepticism regarding the value of mere existence in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well, given the inclusion of Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job into the canon. But ultimately, Kaufmann takes issue with the Ontological Argument as an *a priori* argument that purports to define God into existence: “There is a difference between a perfect being – whatever may be meant by that – thought of as existing (rather than as dead or a mere chimera) and a perfect being which in fact exists. From a definition of God we can only learn how he is to be thought of, not whether he exists.”<sup>88</sup> So again, as with Aquinas, Anselm’s argument represents a closed system of discourse about God that is only accessible or meaningful to those who already share Anselm’s basic beliefs. It may certainly have immense value to those who have such beliefs, but Kaufmann’s humanistic perspective demands a wider and more universal appeal.

The last supposed proof or argument for God that Kaufmann considers is the one that Kant makes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which is really a kind of non-argument. Kant

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

would of course be largely in agreement with the critiques that Kaufmann has made so far about the more traditional proofs for God because Kant acknowledged in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that reason alone could not get us to God. He made reference to another category, practical reason, the kind of reason that guides us in how to live our lives rather than in the mere accumulation of knowledge. Regarding practical reason, there are certain assumptions, or postulates, which are that humans possess a free will, that our souls are immortal, and that God exists. Kaufmann feels that the specific mechanics of Kant's argument are so problematic as to not even warrant full consideration: "Kant's notion of practical reason...has been repudiated in effect by almost all philosophers since his time, and any detailed critique would therefore be of purely historical interest. It would be 'academic.'"<sup>89</sup> However, despite this highly dismissive critique, Kaufmann is able to see virtues in Kant's approach that were quite lacking in the other figures just considered, and which would also seem to point a way forward:

With a fundamental candor he [Kant] spells out the workings of his own mind and of hosts of others like his: he offers a painstaking analysis of his own moral consciousness which he shares with many of his contemporaries and thousands who came before and after him; and his postulate of God's existence shows a deep insight into a religious consciousness which, while certainly not common to all men by virtue of their reason, as Kant thought, was certainly not merely Kant's own idiosyncrasy. This kind of religious consciousness facilitated the acceptance of belief in an afterlife among the Jews at the end of the Old Testament period, at a time when they successfully resisted many other Persian and Hellenistic notions.<sup>90</sup>

So, while Kant made the mistake of thinking that he was making an argument that applied to all human beings as rational agents, he was still able to tap into some valuable psychological insights relating to how some humans have come to embrace God. As will be seen when we get

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 167

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 167-168.

to Kaufmann's more positive and constructive philosophy of religion, this approach is far more valuable than merely making arguments for or against God.

The last stop on Kaufmann's tour of philosophers who have dealt with God is Pascal. As with the case of Kant, Pascal falls into a slightly different category than one who merely offers an argument for the existence of God. First of all, Kaufmann notes that Pascal actually sewed a piece of paper into the lining of his coat as a reminder of his own religious beliefs as being discontinuous with philosophy. This passage, referred to as "The Memorial," specifically identifies the object of Pascal's belief as "'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,' not of philosophers and scholars."<sup>91</sup> Kaufmann then goes on to point out how this fact of Pascal's personal religiosity is out of step with his most well-known contribution to the philosophy of religion, the wager. Unlike any of the other thinkers previously considered, in this argument Pascal really does seem to be addressing somebody who doesn't believe in God in an effort to convince them, but he does so not by trying to *prove* that God exists but rather to simply spell out all of the possibilities and thereby demonstrate that it is in someone's best interest to believe in God regardless. Either God exists or he doesn't – if he does exist and you believe in Him, you will gain eternal happiness in heaven; if he doesn't exist and you believe in Him, you will gain nothing but also, presumably you will lose nothing. However, if you don't believe in Him and God does exist, then you lose by being condemned to eternal suffering in hell, whereas if you don't believe in Him and he doesn't exist, you lose nothing but you also gain nothing. Given these options, only a fool would choose anything other than believing in God (i.e., betting on God's existence, in wagering language). As Pascal counsels us, "I tell you that you will gain even in this life, and that at every step you take along this road you will see that your gain is so

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<sup>91</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 285.

certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you paid nothing.”<sup>92</sup>

This is one more argument that Kaufmann is far from the first to consider and criticize, but he is again trying to take a different approach from those who have come before him. Kaufmann notes that on an intuitive level many people simply find the notion of a wager on God’s existence to be wrongheaded. As William James notes in his treatment of Pascal from an essay already considered, “The talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile.”<sup>93</sup> No matter how prudential it may seem to believe in God, it doesn’t seem like the kind of thing that one can just turn on like a light switch. However, Kaufmann takes issue with Pascal’s wager for a completely different reason and actually invalidates the kind of criticism that James refers to when he notes that “...it is Pascal’s *logic* that is at fault, not his psychology.”<sup>94</sup> As he goes on to explain, Pascal is actually quite depressingly accurate in his grasp of psychology:

Pascal’s psychology is corroborated by millions of examples in totalitarian countries: once people realize the dreadful risks of nonbelief and the rewards for the acceptance of beliefs, it takes most men at most a few years to believe quite firmly. First, one makes believe that one believes, and soon one does believe.

That is the origin of most religious faith: the child begins by acting like the grownups who believe, and soon believes himself. The proofs come later, if at all. *Religious belief generally starts as make-believe.*<sup>95</sup>

Kaufmann is giving at best a back-handed compliment to Pascal’s argument, but it is a compliment nonetheless – the argument correctly recognizes that given the proper motivation, one actually can will oneself to believe something. Of course, there is still the question of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>93</sup> *The Will to Believe*, 7.

<sup>94</sup> *Critique*, 171.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

whether or not this kind of situation would be ideal for the adoption of religious beliefs generally, but that has no bearing on the overall validity of this point at least. But according to Kaufmann, where Pascal goes wrong is at the point where he thought that he had considered all of the logical possibilities necessary for leading one to make the correct wager:

What Pascal overlooked was the hair-raising possibility that God might out-Luther Luther. A special area in hell might be reserved for those who go to mass. Or God might punish those whose faith is prompted by prudence. Perhaps God prefers the abstinent to those who whore around with some denomination he despises. Perhaps he reserves special rewards for those who deny themselves the comfort of belief. Perhaps the intellectual ascetic will win all while those who compromised their intellectual integrity lose everything.<sup>96</sup>

The mathematical precision of Pascal's wager turns out to be an illusion. The irony is that Pascal himself would probably admit that convincing people that believing in God is in their best interest is probably not the way to get them to believe in the kind of God that was the object of his own personal, much more deeply-felt religious commitments. But this is merely one more instance for Kaufmann of the philosophical consideration of God causing an otherwise brilliant man to fall short.

### Ambiguity and God

In his discussion of proofs for God's existence, Kaufmann at one point poses the following rhetorical device of a seemingly straightforward question and answer: "Can one prove God's existence? Yes, but this does not mean that God exists."<sup>97</sup> In this context Kaufmann is talking about the peculiarities of formal logic and how, if one structures an argument correctly, it can prove something and be perfectly valid without actually giving us any new information about the world. However, this also relates to another issue that Kaufmann dives into more deeply in

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 168.

the sixth chapter of the *Critique*, which is the way in which the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the term “God” poses particular problems within the fields of philosophy of religion and, even more significantly, theology. This begins with the first impressions of God that are oftentimes acquired in a practicing or devotional religious context through scripture, or at least stories that one hears that are based on scripture: “Initially, we encounter God as a proper name. He is an individual whose character is manifested in his words and deeds. The character is complex, and as soon as we start abstracting traits from the many things he says and does we are in grave danger of falling into contradictions.”<sup>98</sup> So most people who grow up in a monotheistic religious tradition first encounter God not as a being with the abstract and inaccessible attributes of omnipotence and omnibenevolence, but as a literary character who does specific actions in specific contexts. Of course, one is also taught that God is more than *just* a character in a story. Nevertheless, this may be no different than, for example, first encountering the character of George Washington, a historical person whom one also first learns about through stories. Perhaps some of these stories are of doubtful veracity, like the story of the boy Washington chopping down the cherry tree, but the truth or falsity of the stories does not necessarily have any effect upon how we feel about this character in our minds.

Before delving further into Kaufmann’s account, it is worth stopping to consider the concept of ambiguity more generally. In philosophical discussions it is oftentimes helpful to clearly distinguish ambiguity, which indicates the possibility of more than one meaning, from vagueness, which indicates a lack of clarity in meaning. It may also be useful to briefly look at some observations from one of the definitive works on ambiguity in a literary context, William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. A mere glance at the title is enough to indicate that

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 173.

ambiguity is itself an ambiguous term – there is more than one way in which to interpret it.

Empson describes this general issue in more detail:

[A] word may have several distinct meanings; several meanings connected with one another; several meanings which need one another to complete their meaning; or several meanings which unite together so that the word means one relation or one process. This is a scale which might be followed continuously. ‘Ambiguity’ itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. It is useful to be able to separate these if you wish, but it is not obvious that in separating them at any particular point you will not be raising more problems than you solve.<sup>99</sup>

Empson is considering ambiguity specifically as it relates to the language of poetry, so his remarks can easily be applied to the way in which God is treated in scripture. In addition, all of the sub-species of ambiguity that Empson distinguishes will apply to what Kaufmann has to say about the ambiguity of God, as well as the observation that “...ambiguity is a phenomenon of compression.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, there are certain terms that are so inherently potent that they must of necessity contain multitudes within them, and “God” is one such example. The point of this brief digression is to clarify that ambiguity in and of itself is not necessarily problematic, and I think that this is consistent with Kaufmann’s account. Many devout religious believers would be among the first to admit that “God” is indeed an ambiguous term, and this is precisely what makes it so powerful and evocative. But what Kaufmann intends to show is that the ambiguity of the term leads to certain internal inconsistencies regarding the religious context around it, leading to conclusions which he sees as intellectually untenable.

Kaufmann attempts to make this more evident by considering that, if one first learns about God through the stories of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, this is a wide and varied landscape. What kind of relationship does God, as a character, have towards the Bible? In

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<sup>99</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947), 5-6.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

some ways, it would seem like he is the main character, although probably not the protagonist. But the sheer number of times that he is mentioned is striking. Kaufmann points out that “...‘God’ occurs in so many more different contexts, in almost every book of the Bible, that the resulting complexity is many times, though not literally infinitely, greater than in the case of ‘Moses,’ not to speak of ‘Methusaleh.’”<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, this great quantity of appearances itself contributes to a qualitative shift, such that “...this appearance in widely different contexts and this relevance to radically divergent situations – to everything, in fact – becomes an essential feature of God.”<sup>102</sup> These facts undoubtedly make God unique, but for Kaufmann they also create unique problems when trying to speak meaningfully about him. Adopting a Wittgensteinian tone once again, Kaufmann remarks, “To judge whether a proposition about God is true or false, we must know to what universe of discourse it belongs.”<sup>103</sup> There is a fundamental contrast between the innumerable iterations of God in the Biblical stories and the precise formulae required for a specific religion like Christianity to define its beliefs in a way that distinguishes itself from other religions and heresies. Building upon Pascal, this prompts Kaufmann to suggest another way of clarifying the issue: “Pascal’s familiar distinction between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the God of the philosophers needs to be supplemented with a similar distinction between the God of Scripture and the God of the creeds, the dogmas, and the theologians.”<sup>104</sup>

However, even if such a distinction is observed, this doesn’t change the fact for Kaufmann that, once it is recognized that a term like God is ambiguous, that consequently makes

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<sup>101</sup> *Critique*, 173.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*



seemingly straightforward issues of philosophy of religion infinitely more complex. One example is a problem already considered, whether or not God exists, which "...is ambiguous in the sense that this question, too, might be asked without all reference to the question whether God *really* exists."<sup>105</sup> That is to say, God definitely exists as a concept, a meaningful (if ambiguous) linguistic term, and even a fully-formed literary character (all instances of existing "in the understanding" according to the language of the Ontological Argument), but what effect do all of these different categories have on the question of whether or not God exists in the same way that the table and chair I am sitting at right now exist? And is even that the proper way to frame the issue? The problem that Kaufmann is bringing up here is well illustrated in a famous scenario concocted by the philosopher John Wisdom:

Two people return to their long neglected garden and find among the weeds a few of the old plants surprisingly vigorous. One says to the other 'It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these plants.' Upon inquiry they find that no neighbor has ever seen anyone at work in their garden. The first man says to the other 'He must have worked while people slept.' The other says 'No, someone would have heard him and besides, anybody who cared about the plants would have kept down these weeds.' The first man says 'Look at the way these are arranged. There is purpose and a feeling for beauty here. I believe that someone comes, someone invisible to mortal eyes. I believe that the more carefully we look the more we shall find confirmation of this.' They examine the garden ever so carefully and sometimes they come on new things suggesting the contrary and even that a malicious person has been at work. Besides examining the garden carefully they also study what happens to gardens left without attention. Each learns all the other learns about this and about the garden. Consequently, when after all this, one says 'I still believe a gardener comes' while the other says 'I don't' *their different words now reflect no difference as to what they have found in the garden, no difference as to what they would find in the garden if they looked further and no difference about how fast untended gardens fall into disorder.* [my emphasis]<sup>106</sup>

While this situation is open to a number of different interpretations, one way in which it could be read is as a demonstration of the way in which belief in God is categorically different from an experimental hypothesis because it is basically unfalsifiable. The person who believes that a

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>106</sup> John Wisdom, "Gods," in *Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), 154-155.

gardener has been coming will continue to stick by his belief no matter what information the other person appeals to. Returning to Kaufmann's point, the problem seems to be that the human situation is inherently ambiguous, so any appeal to an entity meant to explain or give some kind of meaning to this situation, such as God, is also going to be ambiguous. And in the absence of definitive proof of the same kind that we have for other aspects of our existence, one who is determined to maintain a belief in God will claim "...that God's mode of existence is unique, that he does not exist in the same sense in which anything else exists but in a sense peculiar to himself. Logically, however, this is no different from saying that God does *not* 'exist.'"<sup>107</sup>

### Kaufmann's Engagement with Modern Theology

By bringing up these issues, Kaufmann now begins to engage with theologians of his own time, many of whom seem to echo the very same critiques he is making. One such figure is Paul Tillich. In the interest of fairness, I will quote the more extended and uninterrupted passage from the first volume of *Systematic Theology* that Kaufmann makes reference to. It can be seen that here at least Tillich would seem to be in pretty strong agreement with Kaufmann, even though he ultimately offers a solution which Kaufmann does not approve of:

[T]he question of God's existence can be neither asked nor answered. If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer – whether negative or affirmative – implicitly denies the nature of God. It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being-itself, not *a* being. On this basis a first step can be taken toward the solution of the problem which usually is discussed as the immanence and transcendence of God. As the power of being, God transcends every being and also the totality of beings – the world. Being-itself is beyond finitude and infinity; otherwise it would be conditioned by something other than itself, and the real power of being would lie beyond both it and that which conditioned it. Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *Critique*, 178.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 237.

So, according to Tillich's perspective a truly religious person would not even concern oneself with God's existence, because such a concern would imply that God is one being among other beings, whereas God is that which makes all beings possible, Being-itself. This is an example of a modern theological approach that would seem to be sophisticated and nuanced enough so as to invalidate many of the points that Kaufmann has made and provide a way to define God while acknowledging ambiguity. But here is Kaufmann's response, which can be seen as the first official shot in his sustained critique of theology as an enterprise:

Tillich's affirmation suggests that theists affirm something after all, and that this affirmation is denied by atheists. But no atheist would deny the affirmation that "God is being-itself"; he would only say that in that case we might as well dispense with all reference to God and – like Heidegger, for example, to whom Tillich is exceedingly close – speak of "being." If Tillich really meant that "God is being-itself," he would not significantly disagree with atheists, except insofar as he was reluctant to give up the name of God and liked to use it redundantly for something for which we already have a perfectly good word. But Tillich, of course, does not really mean what he says here. Remember that "every true theistic statement must be contradicted by an atheistic statement." [Kaufmann is now quoting from another essay by Tillich, "The Concept of God"] According to Tillich, "God is being-itself" is a true theistic statement; so we must add immediately that, of course, God is not really being-itself. Or perhaps we need not add it *immediately*.<sup>109</sup>

There is a lot to unpack here. First of all, Kaufmann is claiming that Tillich's supposed solution to the problem of defining theistic belief is a pseudo-solution, which is to say that it grammatically takes the form of a solution by saying "God is [insert predicate]," but it in fact raises more questions than it answers, among the most important being – how is this truly different from atheism in any meaningful way? Second, by quoting the other essay in tandem with the material from the first volume of *Systematic Theology*, Kaufmann shows that Tillich's position is internally inconsistent. One may protest that it is easy to cherry-pick quotes from a writer that contradict one another, but the texts that Kaufmann cites came out within a two-year

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<sup>109</sup> *Critique*, 179.

period, so he would seem to be playing fair on a scholarly level by assuming that writings in such close chronological proximity should not have such obvious dissonance between them. Finally, there is a certain tone that Kaufmann takes here that, while it can be entertaining for a reader, can perhaps most charitably be described as both a strength *and* a weakness. This tone has been seen before, most notably in Kaufmann's critique of Jaspers, and it is here best illustrated by the sentence, "But Tillich, of course, does not really mean what he says here." Here Kaufmann is being witheringly sarcastic, pointing out that in light of Tillich's claim that every theistic statement must be followed by a corresponding atheistic one, *obviously* he cannot *really* mean that God is being-itself. But this sentence can also be seen as an anticipation of Kaufmann's overall critique of theology, and maybe even a kind of proto-thesis statement. When it comes to God-talk, people do not really mean what they say. And Kaufmann finds this to be not just intellectually dishonest, but also infuriating.

The indignation that Kaufmann feels comes from a fundamental incommensurability that he sees between the poetic language of scripture, which derives much of its power from the unresolved nature of its meaning, and the nature of religious dogma which, for better or worse, must define itself clearly enough such that from it one can determine who belongs to a particular denomination and who is excluded as heretical. As Kaufmann explains, "...assertions about God depend entirely on their ambiguity: it is their apparent meaning, their surface sense, that counts 99 per cent of the time, and it is only under questioning that this is modified, and only under persistent attack is it withdrawn to the point where frequently no sense at all remains."<sup>110</sup> He sees this as essentially being what the enterprise of theology is, the "...determined attempt to make

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

univocal translations of essentially ambiguous propositions.”<sup>111</sup> So understood, theologians must of necessity speak out of both sides of their mouths. On the one hand, they rely upon the powerful and evocative language of scripture, but on the other hand they must simplify this language into a single, unambiguous meaning when it comes to establishing what the content of belief consists of. Kaufmann sees this as the primary way that theology has established itself as a bulwark against religious skepticism: “The theologian defends his religious heritage by sacrificing its plain exoteric meaning. He says to the atheist: you are quite right to deny what you deny, but I deny it, too; what you repudiate is indeed superstitious and wrong – but you are wrong, too.”<sup>112</sup> Basically, the ambiguity of God makes the concept a kind of moving target, so whenever an atheist attacks one version of it, the theologian can deny that one and claim another. What Kaufmann seems to be saying here is that theologians have sacrificed their intellectual integrity as a means of being able to win arguments.

Of course, there is a larger story here that Kaufmann acknowledges, albeit not in detail. As he observes, “To understand such peculiarities of theology, one must remember that theology, and indeed any systematic discussion of God, was born as a defensive maneuver. It is the product of a distinctive historic situation.”<sup>113</sup> Frustratingly, Kaufmann does not outline what that distinctive situation is other than to broadly indicate that it has to do with the formation of *Christianity* specifically in contrast to other religions. But he does return to the issue of dogma and outline how the problems he has brought up so far relate to this, so it will be helpful to have in mind Kaufmann’s own definition of dogma, which he gives as “...definitively formulated propositions of which a religious institution says authoritatively that salvation depends on belief

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

in them.”<sup>114</sup> Before moving on to Christian dogma specifically, he points out that the early Jewish religion of the Old Testament was neither a religion of dogma nor of salvation, and that Buddhism is an example of a religion of salvation with clear and unambiguous dogma in the form of the Four Noble Truths.<sup>115</sup> Christianity, on the other hand, is a religion of salvation with dogma that, despite the best efforts of those who attempted to make it otherwise, remains ambiguous.

This ambiguity is in part due to the *ad hoc* nature of its formation, and it will be necessary to make a brief detour to consider the unique historical situation that informed the creation of Christian dogma. Unfortunately, Kaufmann fails to give specific examples in his consideration here. So, why not bring Tillich back into the conversation? The introduction to *The History of Christian Thought* is actually an essay on dogma as a concept, and Tillich provides an interesting perspective along with examples:

[A]ll dogmas were formulated negatively, that is, as reactions against misinterpretations from inside the church. This is true even of the Apostles' Creed. Take the first article of the Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." This is not simply a statement that says something in itself. It is at the same time the rejection of dualism, formulated after a life-and-death struggle of a hundred years. The same is true of the other dogmas. The later they are, the more clearly they show this negative character.<sup>116</sup>

Tillich is saying that all definitive formulations of Christian belief contain an inescapable historical subtext which imbues them with meanings beyond the surface level. This is very much in line with Kaufmann's overall account of the ambiguity inherent in Christian belief. However, the similarities between these two thinkers don't end there. Tillich's introduction ends with this striking passage:

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), xxxviii-xxxix.

The dogma should not be abolished but interpreted in such a way that it is no longer a suppressive power which produces dishonesty or flight. Instead it is a profound and wonderful expression of the actual life of the church. In this sense I will try to show that in discussing these dogmas, even when they are expressed in the most abstract formulations by means of difficult Greek concepts, we are dealing with those things which the church believed to be the most adequate expression for its life and devotion in its life-and-death struggle against the pagan and Jewish worlds outside, and against all the disintegrating tendencies which appeared inside. My conclusion is that we should estimate the dogma very highly; there is something great about it. But it should not be taken as a set of particular doctrines to which one must subscribe. This is against the spirit of the dogma, against the spirit of Christianity.<sup>117</sup>

There are points in the above passage where Tillich seems to be saying almost the same thing as Kaufmann, especially in the last two sentences. Indeed, compare these with Kaufmann's remark, "The history of the development of Christian dogma is a continual fight for the abundance of mystery and not for rationalistic clarification."<sup>118</sup> And yet, it is hard to say whether these similarities provide a challenge to Kaufmann's argument or if in fact they perfectly prove his point. Tillich seems to be making statements about dogma that are literally unorthodox, yet he is also considered to be one of the leading Christian theologians of the twentieth century. How can this be?

Kaufmann builds upon this position by systematically critiquing the most common and well-known methods of theology. The first one that he considers is the method of analogy, which proceeds by granting that statements about God are not *literally* true, because of course the human mind is unable to have a direct experience of God or his qualities. Instead, the method of analogy proceeds by constructing statements about something we do have direct acquaintance with and expressing how God partially resembles this thing, thereby making a connection that

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., xli-xlii.

<sup>118</sup> *Critique*, 182.

provides a kind of meaningful content. Here is one example that Kaufmann gives, followed by a point-by-point description of the problems connected with it:

The body of the Virgin Mary that was assumed in heaven is similar enough to a human body to warrant the use of the word ‘body’ but dissimilar in not being spatial.

The attempt to interpret such propositions by means of analogy breaks down when we ask what the nonspatial body has in common with a human body, and we realize that all the other key terms of the proposition are also used in a nonliteral sense. Heaven is somehow like the sky, but is not really the sky but also nonspatial. The “assumption” of a nonspatial body in a nonspatial place is not an assumption in any ordinary sense. The word “virgin” poses problems of its own. What we have here is not one analogy but a proposition that is ambiguous through and through.<sup>119</sup>

What Kaufmann appears to be saying here is that in order for an analogy to work, both key terms need to have a stable meaning. If one of the terms does not, then the entire analogy breaks down, and since God and other terms in religion are essentially ambiguous, then it would seem impossible for them to be used in a meaningful analogy. Here is another example:

The statement that God loves man cannot be explained...by saying simply that “love” is here employed analogously. Nor does it really help to say that the kind of love meant has been specified to some extent: it is said to be like a father’s love for his children. At other times it is compared to a man’s love for his unfaithful wife (in Hosea, for example), like a man’s love for the beloved of his youth, like a man’s love for his bride – but not one of these metaphors can bear the strain of consistent interpretation as an analogy.<sup>120</sup>

One could respond to Kaufmann’s criticism by saying that these kinds of propositions do have a true meaning beyond the analogical, just not a meaning that is accessible to us. But Kaufmann’s point in this discussion is that, if that is the case, then why are we even trying to strive for a meaning that we can never obtain? If the primary term in question, God, is essentially ambiguous, then that is going to infect all attempts at discourse about him that tries to limit the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 183-184.



meaning to a single interpretation, and this is what Kaufmann sees theology as primarily trying to do.

Kaufmann next considers a slightly different theological strategy, the appeal to the notion that statements about God are *symbolically* true, which once again leads him into conversation with Tillich. The near agreement of Tillich and Kaufmann on various points has already been noted, and Kaufmann actually makes a pretty surprising admission before subjecting one of Tillich's most famous ideas to critical scrutiny: "With his radiant lack of resentment, he has no liking for personal polemics and would rather emphasize significant agreement; and it would be easy to enlist him as an ally even concerning some of the central motifs of this book. But he is first and foremost a Christian theologian; and it won't do to ignore that."<sup>121</sup> As Kaufmann continues to build his case, he is making his stance clearer and clearer – Christian theology is an intellectually tainted enterprise, so whatever other virtues one may have, if one belongs to this tribe it is enough to make one suspect in his eyes. Tillich represents this enterprise for Kaufmann by trying to reformulate the analogical method in a more convincing way with his theory of symbols. Here is a brief description Tillich gives of a symbol and how it is to be differentiated from a mere sign:

Special emphasis must be laid on the insight that symbol and sign are different; that, while the sign bears no necessary relation to that to which it points, the symbol participates in the reality of that for which it stands. The sign can be changed arbitrarily according to the demands of expediency, but the symbol grows and dies according to the correlation between that which is symbolized and the persons who receive it as a symbol. Therefore, the religious symbol, the symbol which points to the divine, can be a true symbol only if it participates in the power of the divine to which it points.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>122</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 239.

Examples of what Tillich is talking about are easy enough to come by. One might regard a map of the United States as a sign that indicates the concept of America, but this does not have the emotional resonance of an American flag, which would therefore qualify as a symbol that actually participates in the concept of America and therefore has emotional resonance. Similarly, statements about God beyond the definition, “God is being-itself,” are all symbolic because they point beyond themselves to larger reality and thereby participate in this reality in some way without making a definitive statement that would resolve the ambiguity. Tillich would therefore seem to have solved the problem that Kaufmann has brought up.

Kaufmann, however, is not impressed by this at all. Examining Tillich’s claims, he asks, “Does a proposition about God really ‘participate in the reality of that for which it stands’? This suggestion is extremely unclear. It sounds profound, but a moment’s reflection will show that such ‘participation’ is very common and not in the least mysterious – nor particularly relevant to discourse about God.”<sup>123</sup> Although Kaufmann doesn’t make an explicit connection in his discussion here, his critique of Tillich on these points is surely related to his critique of Heidegger, who he sees as a philosopher with a great sense of showmanship and who has a talent for making it appear to the reader that something great and portentous is on the horizon, but when one examines the claims more closely one can see that not much content is actually being put forth. Furthermore, Kaufmann points out that the distinction between sign and symbol that Tillich talks about is not a real one that exists, at least in the English language, such that Tillich is pulling a kind of intellectual sleight-of-hand in which he purports to be describing a distinction that exists within language whereas he is in fact trying to *introduce* such a distinction.<sup>124</sup> Finally,

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<sup>123</sup> *Critique*, 192.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-193.

Kaufmann once again identifies what he believes to be an internal inconsistency in Tillich's thought when he notes that "God is being-itself...is surely neither a symbolic statement nor a nonsymbolic statement: it is no statement at all, it is a definition – and as it happens, a definition utterly at odds with the meaning of 'God' in probably more than 95 per cent of our religious tradition."<sup>125</sup> So, despite whatever admiration Kaufmann may have for Tillich, he ultimately represents the worst tendencies of modern theology in his proposal of a highly idiosyncratic and implausible definition of God, and in his pseudo-solution to the philosophically intractable problem of ambiguity. As Kaufmann sums it up, "His [Tillich's] apparently so simple and straightforward diction hides unfathomable ambiguity."<sup>126</sup>

Another prominent methodology of modern theology that Kaufmann examines is that of demythologization, and this brings him into conversation with the theologian Rudolf Bultmann. As we will see, Kaufmann has fewer specific problems with this methodology itself, yet his discussion of it uncovers what he sees as even more problematic aspects inherent within Christianity. First, some background on how Bultmann defines demythologization and its significance. The essay in which he introduces the idea begins:

The world picture of the New Testament is a mythical world picture. The world is a three-story structure, with earth in the middle, heaven above it, and hell below it. Heaven is the dwelling place of God and the heavenly figures, the angels; the world below is hell, the place of torment. But even the earth is not simply the scene of natural day-to-day occurrences, of foresight and work that reckon with order and regularity; rather, it, too, is a theater for the working of supernatural powers, God and his angels, Satan and his demons. These supernatural powers intervene in natural occurrences and in the thinking, willing, and acting of human beings; wonders are nothing unusual. (...) History does not run its own steady, lawful course but is moved and guided by supernatural powers.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>127</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation," in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1.

After sketching out this picture of the mythical worldview of the New Testament, Bultmann describes how this presents a problem to the contemporary situation:

All of this is mythological talk, and the individual motifs may be easily traced to the contemporary mythology of Jewish apocalypticism and of the Gnostic myth of redemption. Insofar as it is mythological talk it is incredible to men and women today because for them the mythical world picture is a thing of the past. Therefore, contemporary Christian proclamation is faced with the question whether, when it demands faith from men and women, it expects them to acknowledge this mythical world picture of the past. If this is impossible, it then has to face the question whether the New Testament proclamation has a truth that is independent of the mythical world picture, in which case it would be the task of theology to demythologize the Christian proclamation.<sup>128</sup>

So, demythologization is a kind of translation of the obviously mythical elements (i.e., those elements that are unbelievable and therefore anathema to the modern sensibility) into a message that will have resonance for the contemporary believer.

Given Kaufmann's critique of certain theological methods so far, it may be surprising that in his consideration of Bultmann he actually finds demythologization to be quite uncontroversial as a general practice. As Kaufmann observes, "Any critique of Bultmann should begin by recognizing that demythologizing is not his private project but common to all theologians, and not only theologians."<sup>129</sup> In support of this point, Kaufmann gives two examples, and before going into these it should be noted that these examples are drawn from Buddhism and the Hebrew Bible, two traditions which Kaufmann continually contrasts with Christianity to its detriment. The first case he describes is the story of the Buddha who, immediately after achieving enlightenment, was tempted by Mara to enter the state of Nirvana. But instead of doing so, the Buddha decided to stay in this world and help others achieve enlightenment. This story is very important for the Mahayana school of Buddhism specifically

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>129</sup> *Critique*, 197.

because it demonstrates that helping others achieve enlightenment is more important than merely focusing on one's own path. The other example that Kaufmann gives is the story of Jonah, pointing out that the most familiar part of this story, Jonah being swallowed by the great fish, is also the least relevant. The more significant part in which God spares the city of Nineveh is meant to demonstrate that anyone can gain God's forgiveness without the necessity of rituals. As Kaufmann explains, to ask the question of whether or not these two stories report actual historical events is to completely miss the point. Rather, both of them offer fundamental insights about morality, and "...we do not fully understand these stories and beliefs until we also grasp the lessons they teach."<sup>130</sup> If demythologization simply amounts to taking stories that at first seem fanciful or far-fetched and seeing the moral message behind the supernatural elements, then Kaufmann has no problem with this. But in his consideration of demythologization generally and Bultmann specifically, Kaufmann is intent to make two points – first, if such a process is performed upon passages from the New Testament, the moral message that is to be obtained is far more problematic than many Christians would be willing to admit. Second, what Bultmann does is not really the same as this kind of demythologization, and instead reveals some other troubling tendencies about the practice of theology.

In applying this same process of demythologization to the New Testament, Kaufmann chooses John 3:16-18, verses that are generally considered to contain the essence of the Christian message if there is one:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 199.

condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (NRSV)

Here is Kaufmann's exegesis of these verses:

The valuations implicit in the Christian conception of Christ's atonement which are here spelled out by the evangelist are not...those which some readers have found here. Although there can be no doubt whatever that the high value of love is extolled here – to say that God loves man means, at least in part, that love of man is divine – a supreme valuation of love is expressed far more clearly and unequivocally in the Mahayana stories which have been mentioned and in the Book of Jonah. In the Gospel according to John it is immediately added that those who do not believe are damned.<sup>131</sup>

Kaufmann's point is clear – if one takes the moral messages of the New Testament at face value, then Christianity is anything but a humane religion. In fact, there are at least two other religions one can point to, Judaism and Buddhism, which are far better examples of the kind of compassion and mercy that Christianity purports to expound. This is a position that Kaufmann will develop in *The Faith of a Heretic*, but it is worth quoting in full his lengthy description that is basically his opening statement for this entire line of argumentation:

Why should God have so ordered the world that all men were headed for everlasting damnation and that he was unable to help them except by begetting a son with a woman betrothed to Joseph, and by then having this son betrayed and crucified and resurrected, by having him fetch Abraham and a few of the damned out of hell while leaving the rest to their lot, and by saving only that small minority among men who first heard this story and then believed it? Surely, such a God is not an unequivocal symbol of love. Indeed, if human terms are to be applied to this God analogously, he would appear to be at least as interested in bizarre effects, shrouded in an air of mystery, and in dire vengeance on all who fail to believe what is exceedingly difficult to believe, as he could possibly be said to be concerned with demonstrating the significance of love.

As long as we cling to the conception of hell, God is not love in any human sense – and least of all, love in the human sense raised to the highest potency of perfection. And if we renounce belief in hell, then the notion that God gave his son to save those who believe in the incarnation and resurrection loses meaning. The significance of salvation depends on an alternative, and in traditional Christianity this alternative is eternal torment.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 200-201.

These are powerful words from Kaufmann that have a profound sense of moral indignation behind them. There are certainly a number of possible ways to respond to Kaufmann on these points, but at the very least it should be granted that Kaufmann does indeed bring up points that deserve to be answered.

Before going any further, I would like to consider some possible answers. The problem that Kaufmann introduces is certainly not a new one. It is generally referred to as the problem of hell and is considered to be an adjunct to the problem of evil. There are numerous contemporary philosophers of religion who identify as Christian and are keenly aware of this problem and have attempted to grapple with it in a sensitive way. Among the most prominent is Marilyn McCord Adams, who favors a doctrine of universal salvation and considers any attempt to reconcile a perfectly good God with a scenario in which even a small number of people are condemned to hell to be "...at best incongruous and at worst disingenuous."<sup>133</sup> Another expert in contemporary theodicy, Stephen T. Davis, considers the problem of hell in his explication of the free will defense of evil, and proposes the following solution:

I do believe that hell exists, but I do not hold that it is a place where protesting people are led against their will to be tortured vengefully. I believe that the people who will end up separated from God freely choose hell and would be unhappy in God's presence. Having lived their lives apart from God, they will choose – eternally – to go on doing so. So it is not a bad thing that they do not spend eternity in the presence of God. *People who will prove to be incorrigibly evil will never come to the point of desiring the beatific vision.* [my emphasis] Furthermore, I do not believe hell is a place of torture. Biblical metaphors that seem to some to suggest so point, I believe, to the deep regret the citizens of hell will feel that they are not able to live in the presence of God, the source of all life, light, and love. Though they freely choose hell and could not be happy in paradise, I believe they will clearly understand what they have chosen to miss.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians" in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 302.

<sup>134</sup> Stephen T. Davis, "Free Will and Evil" in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 87.

This appears to be a more sensitive and thoughtful examination of how the concept of hell might be reinterpreted to make it more humane. However, I have emphasized the one sentence in particular above to demonstrate that Davis appears to be suggesting that people who do not want to be in the presence of God are by definition “incorrigibly evil.” There is no allowance for the possibility of a morally good person who might just so happen to also be an atheist. Whether this is unintentional or deliberate on Davis’ part, it would seem to support Kaufmann’s point that there are certain problematic aspects of the Christian religion that have become so central that many people simply take them for granted.

Returning to the case of Bultmann, his version of demythologizing the New Testament does not take the approach of merely extracting moral teachings from the text. Rather, Bultmann sees his project as gaining deeper and more fundamental insights about the human situation, which prompts him to interpret the mythical content of the New Testament “...in anthropological terms – or, better, in existentialist terms.”<sup>135</sup> In this respect, Bultmann is very much influenced by Heidegger:

Martin Heidegger’s existential analysis of human existence seems to be only a profane philosophical presentation of the New Testament view of who we are: beings existing historically in care for ourselves on the basis of anxiety, ever in the moment of decision between the past and the future, whether we will lose ourselves in the world of what is available and of the “one,” or whether we will attain our authenticity by surrendering all securities and being unreservedly free for the future. Is this not how we are also understood in the New Testament? When critics have occasionally objected that I interpret the New Testament with the categories of Heidegger’s philosophy of existence, I fear they have missed the real problem. What ought to alarm them is that philosophy all by itself already sees what the New Testament says.<sup>136</sup>

That’s a clear statement from Bultmann concerning the overarching paradigm he uses for his exegesis of the New Testament. But Kaufmann finds Bultmann’s overall perspective to be far

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<sup>135</sup> Bultmann, 9.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



too single-minded and reductive for a collection of texts as multifarious as the New Testament: “One may agree that if God put a question to man, it certainly needs clarification. But one may wonder whether the New Testament poses any single question. Bultmann’s bland assumption that this question must be whether we accept *the* conception of human existence offered by the New Testament does not allay this doubt.”<sup>137</sup> Because Bultmann has claimed that the message of the New Testament is basically the same as the message of Heidegger’s philosophy, he is basically treating a group of texts written by a diverse group of authors in the same way as he would treat a single text by one author, in this case *Being and Time*, thereby imposing an artificial unity upon them.

Kaufmann is intent to show that this connection that Bultmann makes between the New Testament and Heidegger’s philosophy influences both the specific verses that he chooses and the specific ways in which he interprets them that will turn out to be fatally inconsistent. Bultmann identifies the decision that the New Testament calls us to make as “...radical submission to God, which expects everything from God and nothing from ourselves; and it is the release thereby given from everything in the world that can be disposed of, and hence the attitude of being free from the world [the original German reads *Gelöstheit von allem weltlich Verfügbaren* which Kaufmann interprets as Heideggerian terminology<sup>138</sup>], of freedom.”<sup>139</sup> He then goes on to tie this interpretation more explicitly with particular verses from the New Testament:

This freedom from the world [*Entweltlichung* in the original German, which Kaufmann translates as de-worldlization, a more explicit Heideggerian coinage<sup>140</sup>] is, in principle, not asceticism, but rather a distance from the world for which all participation in things

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<sup>137</sup> *Critique*, 207.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>139</sup> Bultmann, 18.

<sup>140</sup> *Critique*, 210-211.

worldly takes place in the attitude of “as if not” (ὡς μή; 1 Cor. 7:29-31).<sup>141</sup> Believers are lords over all things (1 Cor. 3:21-23); they have the “authority” (ἐξουσία) of which the Gnostic also boasts. But, as Paul says, “I have authority over everything, but I will not give anything authority over me.” (1 Cor. 6:12; see also 10:23-24). Believers can rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15), but they no longer fall subject to anything in the world (1 Cor. 7:17-24). Everything in the world has receded for them into the indifference of things that have no significance in themselves.<sup>142</sup>

Now having established what Bultmann takes to be the central message of the New Testament, basically a Heidegger-inflected version of Paul’s interim ethic, Kaufmann then considers this in light of the fact that Bultmann was working in Germany during the Third Reich. This was a period when many prominent intellectuals were forced to make some difficult decisions. Some, like Heidegger, made decisions that were quite unfortunate and embarrassing. Kaufmann sees Bultmann, much like Karl Jaspers, as falling into more of a middle category, but he has some interesting and unexpected things to say about Bultmann’s actions in light of his theological views:

What is surprising is not that Bultmann and most of the other, at least equally Lutheran and Pauline, members of the defiant Confessing Church did not say and do more during the Hitler years; *what is astonishing is rather that they should have done as much as they did.* [my emphasis] (...) Verses like...Paul’s “as if not,” which comes close to being the core of the New Testament for Bultmann, might well have been taken to justify a complete quietism.<sup>143</sup>

For Kaufmann, Bultmann is an interesting case study because he is a prominent theologian and a leading scholar of the New Testament, yet his methodology and conclusions demonstrate that “...all important decisions come before interpretation, and the selection and exegesis of the texts

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<sup>141</sup> These verses are central enough to the argument that I will include them here, with the “as if not” portions in italics: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 – I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short: from now on, let even those who had wives be *as though they had none*, and those who mourn *as though they were not mourning*, and those who rejoice *as though they were not rejoicing*, and those who buy *as though they had no possessions*, and those who deal with the world *as though they had no dealings with it*. For the present form of this world is passing away. (NRSV, my emphasis)

<sup>142</sup> Bultmann, 18.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

is dictated by the prior convictions of the exegete.”<sup>144</sup> Bultmann already found the core message of the New Testament in Heidegger’s philosophy (indeed, he said it himself) and then chose passages from the New Testament that would support this. Such an enterprise is hardly intellectually respectable in Kaufmann’s eyes, and it is made all the more vacuous by the fact that Bultmann did not live by these principles in his own life. This prompts Kaufmann to caustically sum up the basic situation with a variation on F.H. Bradley’s saying about metaphysics: “theology is the finding of dubious reasons for what the theologian has believed all along; and when the chips are down, he consults his conscience and, if necessary, forgets his theology. Sometimes this means a decided improvement.”<sup>145</sup>

As the tone of that last quote indicates, Kaufmann’s critique of Bultmann is beginning to lead into a sustained polemic against theology, and the influence of Kaufmann’s intellectual mentor, Nietzsche, can also be seen yet again. It is debatable the extent to which Kaufmann was influenced by the content of Nietzsche’s philosophy, but he was certainly influenced by Nietzsche’s style, and what Kaufmann says here rivals the most incendiary statements in *The Antichrist* for their sheer gall and provocativeness. But before diving into this, it is worth stopping to ask why Kaufmann singles out Tillich and Bultmann specifically. It could merely be because they are two of the most prominent theologians at the time that Kaufmann is writing, and he does make it clear that he would not waste his time talking about them at length if they did not represent the best efforts of an albeit flawed discipline. It could have to do with Tillich and Bultmann both being Lutherans, which has resonance for Kaufmann both in terms of his own personal background and in the context of the history of German anti-Semitism. However, I

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 212.

think the deciding factor is that both of these theologians were very much influenced by the philosophy of Heidegger, who really turns out to be the closest thing to Kaufmann's intellectual archenemy.<sup>146</sup> Kaufmann may not have much respect for Christian theology generally, but he thinks it becomes even worse when coupled with Heideggerian influences:

Tillich baptizes Heidegger's *Entschlossenheit* and christens it "The Courage to Be." The vacuity of Heidegger's "resolution" and Bultmann's "decision" ... seems overcome: the question "resolved for what?" is answered "to be." But on reflection "the courage to be" is as empty as "resolution"; and the claim that Christianity alone teaches "the courage to be" hardly makes any sense.<sup>147</sup>

We can now better understand Kaufmann's statement about Aquinas and how the attempt to assimilate Aristotle into Christian theology is at least preferable to more modern attempts. But what implications does Kaufmann's discussion of Tillich and Bultmann have for his overall assessment of what he sees theology as being primarily engaged in? This can be seen in the section that immediately follows, entitled "Gerrymandering":

This is a political term, but unfortunately, politicians have no monopoly on dividing districts in an unnatural and unfair way to give one party an advantage over its opponent. Many theologians are masters of this art. Out of the New Testament they pick appropriate verses and connect them to fashion an intellectual and moral self-portrait which they solemnly call "the message of the New Testament" or "the Christian view"; and out of other Scriptures they carve all kinds of inferior straw men.

*Theologians do not just do this incidentally: this is theology.* [my emphasis] Doing theology is like doing a jigsaw puzzle in which the verses of Scripture are the pieces: the finished picture is prescribed by each denomination, with a certain latitude allowed. What makes the game so pointless is that you do not have to use all the pieces, and that pieces which do not fit may be reshaped after pronouncing the words "this means." That is called exegesis.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Kaufmann's comments about Heidegger in the existentialism anthology were noted in the last chapter, but if one wants to see Kaufmann's definitive statement on Heidegger, please consult the second volume of Kaufmann's *Discovering the Mind* trilogy – *Nietzsche, Heidegger, Buber*. The Heidegger section of this book represents, in this writer's humble opinion, one of the most brutal and complete takedowns of one philosopher by another. The book was published in 1980, four years after Heidegger's death, and I believe that Kaufmann intentionally waited to publish something like this until after his passing, either out of professional or simply common courtesy. It is that damning.

<sup>147</sup> *Critique*, 223.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

These are, once again, strong words from Kaufmann, so strong that they may even test the limits of conventional intellectual debate. Rather than seriously engaging with Kaufmann's claims, one can just as easily imagine a reaction of head-shaking and disbelieving laughter on the part of those whom Kaufmann is calling out. And yet, they do not come out of nowhere. They are the culmination of a case that Kaufmann has been trying to make throughout the *Critique*. And they are certainly not without precedent. Compare Kaufmann's characterization with the words of Thomas Paine:

The study of theology, as it stands in Christian churches, is the study of nothing; it is founded on nothing; it rests on no principles; it proceeds by no authorities; it has no data; it can demonstrate nothing; and it admits of no conclusion. Not anything can be studied as a science, without our being in possession of the principles upon which it is founded; and as this is the case with Christian theology, it is therefore the study of nothing.<sup>149</sup>

So, Kaufmann's critique is in one sense part of a long tradition of skepticism towards religion that dates back to the Enlightenment. And yet, he does not seem to have the kind of agenda that is generally associated with that movement, i.e., the complete eradication of religion in favor of some kind of newly secularized spirituality. Kaufmann is a humanist, but a very particular kind of humanist who believes that valuable and unique insights can be gained from the Jewish tradition and from a tragic view of life that is just as alien to the optimism of the Enlightenment as it is to Christianity. It is in his next book, *The Faith of a Heretic*, in which these views will be more fully developed.

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<sup>149</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1877), 149.

## Chapter 3: Shouting to the Heavens – Kaufmann the Heretic

So far in this study I have considered Kaufmann's commentary on other philosophers and his interesting if unfocused *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, but now is the time to examine his first truly unified work expounding his own philosophical views, *The Faith of a Heretic*. This is certainly far from the last work that Kaufmann will write, but it marks the end of the first phase of his career as a philosopher of religion and therefore makes sense as the last major work of his to be dealt with in this study. The work is very closely connected with the *Critique* to the point where one might think of it as a kind of sequel, but Kaufmann himself probably describes the matter a bit more accurately when he says in the Preface, "This book is continuous with my previous efforts, but goes beyond them."<sup>1</sup> There is certainly a decided change in tone. The voice that Kaufmann writes with in the *Critique* is deliberately impersonal, as well described by Stanley Corngold: "The persona in *Critique* is the philosophical self, full of noetic verve, lightened by the absence of empirical characteristics...It is the voice of critical reason, meaning

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), ix.

to ‘compel the assent of every reasonable person[.]’<sup>2</sup> His *Heretic*, on the other hand, seems to be where Kaufmann lets down his guard and lets the reader know some significant autobiographical details. Such details provide some helpful context and further dimension to arguments that he makes both in the *Critique* and in this book. Consider the following information he reveals early on:

I was brought up a Lutheran. When I found that I could not believe in the Trinity, and especially not that Jesus was God, I decided to become a Jew. I was only eleven, and my parents felt that I was too young to make such a far-reaching choice. I persisted, and the matter was discussed for months. During that time, Hitler came to power; and now I was told that in view of the persecution my decision might entail I should certainly wait until I was older. I insisted that one could not change one’s mind for a reason like that. I did not realize until a little later that all of my grandparents had been Jewish; and none of us knew that this, and not one’s own religion, would determine the Nazis’ classification.<sup>3</sup>

Given that Kaufmann is barely forty when *Faith* comes out and is already over a decade into a prolific writing career, one should not be too surprised to hear that he was also a *wunderkind* regarding his religious self-understanding. However, this anecdote also sheds light on the specific tone of moral indignation that Kaufmann often adopts when discussing religious ideas with which he disagrees.

### Heretic or Antichrist?

This tone is present at the very beginning of the book, when Kaufmann proclaims, “Of faith and morals, one cannot speak honestly for long without hurting feelings. Therefore, most people speak dishonestly of the most important subjects.”<sup>4</sup> These words provide a decent shorthand for his entire attitude throughout the work, a kind of preliminary thesis statement. The book is a development of an article with the same title that Kaufmann wrote for Harper’s

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<sup>2</sup> Corngold, 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

Magazine in February of 1959, the last in a series. The articles were meant to show a number of different religious perspectives – that of a Jew, a Catholic, a Protestant, and Kaufmann’s was meant to show a skeptical or rationalistic approach to religion. It should come as no surprise that Kaufmann’s critical eye is directed towards Christianity most specifically, not just the religion itself but the charismatic individual at the center of it, and he once again demonstrates the shortcomings of both when compared to other traditions:

Although Jesus is widely considered mankind’s greatest moral teacher, the greatest Christians, not to speak of scholars, have never been able to agree what his moral teachings were. Matthew, and he alone, reports that Jesus said: “Let your Yes be Yes, and your No, No.” But the four Evangelists agree in ascribing to Jesus evasive and equivocal answers to plain questions, not only those of the high priest and Pilate; and quite generally the Jesus of the New Testament avoids straightforward statements, preferring parables and hyperboles. Some of the parables are so ambiguous that different Evangelists, not to speak of later theologians, offer different interpretations. Nor have Christians ever been able to agree on the import of the hyperboles of the Sermon on the Mount. Luther, for example, taught that Christ’s commandments were intended to teach man his utter incapacity for doing good: man must throw himself on the mercy of God, believing that Christ died for our sins. On concrete moral issues, Jesus can be, and has been, cited on almost all sides. The Buddha and the Hebrew prophets were not so equivocal.<sup>5</sup>

This is a development of the points that he made in the *Critique* concerning the problem of ambiguity, but one can also detect unmistakable echoes of Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist*. Compare what Kaufmann says here with Nietzsche’s characterizations of Jesus: “For this anti-realist, that not a word is taken literally is precisely the presupposition of being able to speak at all.”<sup>6</sup> And also, “...such a symbolist par excellence stands outside all religion, all cult concepts, all history, all natural science, all experience of the world, all knowledge, all politics, all psychology, all books, all art – his ‘knowledge’ is *pure foolishness* precisely concerning the fact that such things

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Kaufmann, “The Faith of a Heretic” in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays* (New York: Meridian, 1976), 156-157.

<sup>6</sup> *Portable Nietzsche*, 605.



exist.”<sup>7</sup> However, while Kaufmann does seem to have moved back towards Nietzsche in his newfound heretical role in some ways, there are also important differences. In Nietzsche’s case, these observations about Jesus are made in a tone of respect and even a certain degree of reverence, albeit moderated with bafflement. In Kaufmann’s case, however, he sees Jesus’ symbolic mode of expression as needlessly cryptic and problematic.

The article also contains other less obvious Nietzschean references. At one point Kaufmann makes a comparison of the central Christian message with the tragic worldview, which has great significance within his overall philosophy. He sees these two perspectives as fundamentally antithetical to one another. This may seem surprising in light of the fact that tragedy emphasizes the ennobling nature of suffering, and what story would seem to do this better than the crucifixion of Jesus? But as Kaufmann explains:

Much of the appeal of Christianity is due to the fact that it contains at least intimations – but really no more than that – of this tragic ethos. But the story of Christ remains uncomfortably similar to the saga of the boss’s son who works very briefly in the shop, where he makes a great point of his home and is cruelly beaten by some of his fellow workers, before he joins his father as co-chairman of the board and wreaks horrible revenge. This “happy” end makes most of the Christian martyrs, too, untragic figures. These observations may strike believers as blasphemous, but they might do well to reflect on the manner in which they pass judgment on other religions, and there may be some point in considering how one’s own religion must strike those who don’t accept it.<sup>8</sup>

What is notable about this passage beyond the content itself is that it is also strikingly similar to an evocative parable that Nietzsche relates in aphorism 84 of “The Wanderer and his Shadow”:

*The prisoners.* – One morning the prisoners entered the workyard: the warder was missing. Some of them started working straightaway, as was their nature, others stood idle and looked around defiantly. Then one stepped forward and said loudly: ‘Work as much as you like, or do nothing: it is all one. Your secret designs have come to light, the prison warder has been eavesdropping on you and in the next few days intends to pass a fearful judgment upon you. You know him, he is harsh and vindictive. But now pay heed:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 605-606.

<sup>8</sup> “The Faith of a Heretic,” 159-160.

you have hitherto mistaken me: I am not what I seem but much more: I am the son of the prison warder and I mean everything to him. I can save you, I will save you: but, note well, only those of you who *believe* me that I am the son of the prison warder; the rest may enjoy the fruit of their unbelief.’ – ‘Well now’, said one of the older prisoners after a brief silence, ‘what can it matter to you if we believe you or do not believe you? If you really are his son and can do what you say, the put in a good word for all of us: it would be really good of you if you did so. But leave aside this talk of belief and unbelief!’<sup>9</sup>

I merely highlight the connection between these two passages to demonstrate that the influence of Nietzsche upon Kaufmann is at times exceedingly subtle. Kaufmann makes no explicit reference to Nietzsche anywhere in his remarks, and the similarity to the passage from Nietzsche is certainly not so close as to render Kaufmann guilty of outright plagiarism. Yet, although Kaufmann never produced his own translation of this particular text of Nietzsche, there is no question that he was familiar with it, and the way in which both Kaufmann and Nietzsche transplant the story of Jesus into the context of the son of an earthly, “all too human” authority figure seems a bit too striking to be explained away as mere coincidence or parallel thinking. Of course, one can also detect in Kaufmann’s remarks the echoes of other proto-existentialists included in his anthology such as Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Kafka, but it seems clear that he possessed such a thorough and complete mastery and familiarity with Nietzsche’s philosophy that he could allude to a Nietzschean passage to enlarge his own ideas by way of the Nietzschean echo.

Another significant aspect of the article is Kaufmann’s statement of his own religious affiliation. From what has been cited so far it may seem that Kaufmann, while no doubt highly critical of Christianity, is attacking it from the stance of Judaism. This is true to some extent, owing to the fact that another intellectual mentor of his was Leo Baeck, whose essay “Romantic Religion” is a sustained critique of Christianity from the Jewish perspective and was translated

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 331.

into English by Kaufmann in a volume along with a number of other essays.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Baeck helped Kaufmann prepare for his bar mitzvah and he briefly studied to be a rabbi under him.<sup>11</sup> However, while Kaufmann is certainly an admirer of the Hebrew Bible and the message of the prophets, he also differentiates these from the modern religion of Judaism:

Why, then, do I not accept Judaism? In view of all the things I do not believe, I have no wish to observe the six-hundred-odd commandments and prohibitions that define the traditional Jewish way of life, or to participate in religious services. With most so-called orthodox Jews I have much less in common than with all kinds of other people, Jews and Gentiles. Reform Judaism seems to be to involve compromise, conformism, and the wish to be innocuous. To that extent, it, too, stands opposed to the ethos of the prophets. And if a succession of great Jews should equal the boldness of the prophets, who repudiated the ritual of their day, and go a step further by also renouncing, and denouncing, all kinds of belief – would not this amount to giving up religion?<sup>12</sup>

There are two interesting things to note in this passage. First, while Kaufmann is certainly most critical of Christianity, these remarks demonstrate that he also sees a similar, if less extreme, tendency within modern Judaism as an organized religion to artificially simplify the power of the tension and ambiguity inherent in the original scriptures. This shows that Kaufmann does not necessarily have an axe to grind with one religion in particular, and perhaps also indicates a slightly less polemical approach than may have at first been evident in his remarks in the *Critique*. Second, Kaufmann seems to be suggesting that what is so powerful in the message of the Hebrew prophets is that it transcends any specific religious message. Indeed, as we shall see throughout *Heretic*, Kaufmann identifies the most admirable individuals throughout history as though who explicitly go against the established teachings of their day. In other words – heretics.

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

<sup>11</sup> Kaufmann talks about these experiences most directly in a late interview that was published posthumously. See Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, "An Interview with Walter Kaufmann," *Judaism* 30 (Winter 1981), 124-125.

<sup>12</sup> "The Faith of a Heretic," 160.

So, what exactly is the full significance of this term for Kaufmann? He begins by citing the dictionary definition of heresy, "...a set of opinions 'at variance with established or generally received principles.'" <sup>13</sup> Perhaps already stacking the deck a certain way, he then adds, "In this sense, heresy is the price of all originality and innovation."<sup>14</sup> However, there is the possibility that Kaufmann's use of the term is a bit of a misnomer, at least when applied to himself, since a heretic is presumably one who is a member of a community against which he is rebelling or differentiating himself in some way. Corngold highlights this issue, noting that "...the application of the concept of 'heresy' can seem puzzling, since a heretic, according to one authority, 'is one who deviates from an established orthodoxy under the conviction that he more truly represents the faith than do its orthodox adherents.' In Kaufmann's case the orthodoxy certainly cannot be Christianity or Judaism."<sup>15</sup> Although Kaufmann himself would no doubt approve of this examination of whether or not he is using a term in precisely the right way, he also provides a certain explanation for it in a later interview: "The reason for calling this *The Faith of a Heretic* was that I thought, and still think, that I do not belong to any school, that I am a loner. From any number of points of view, religious as well as philosophical, I am a heretic – a dissenter."<sup>16</sup> This may seem a reasonable enough explanation, but there is also a sense in which Kaufmann's instinct to use "heretic" is of a piece with his translation of the title of Nietzsche's work as "Antichrist" rather than "Antichristian." We can perhaps grant Kaufmann's right to use the term while also acknowledging yet another occurrence of that Nietzschean flair for the dramatic.

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<sup>13</sup> *Heretic*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Corngold, 160. Corngold is citing R.B.Y. Scott, another professor at Princeton with whom Kaufmann will have a back and forth "Guerre de Plume" which will be explored in more detail later on in this chapter in the section on the critical appraisal of the book.

<sup>16</sup> "An Interview with Walter Kaufmann," 121.

“I am just looking for an honest man.”

The first couple chapters of *Heretic* contain similar efforts at ground-clearing that were seen in the *Critique*, but Kaufmann is now much more focused in his treatment of the specific issues that he wants to address. After the prologue, the first chapter is entitled “The Quest for Honesty,” and is an impassioned argument for rediscovering the role of philosophers as critics of their age. Indeed, he states that this is how philosophy as a discipline first developed and that “...one may view the history of philosophy as a history of heresy.”<sup>17</sup> Looking back at its early practitioners, he sees the common factor among Thales, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as “...a truly stunning lack of reverence for the past.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than relying upon the mythic or religious traditions of the culture in which they lived, they sought new explanations for the phenomena of the world and were not concerned about whether or not the ideas that they developed went against established beliefs. As Kaufmann further explains, “They not only opposed the common sense of their time and some of the most revered names of the past but they did not presume to speak in the name of the Lord or to interpret correctly a previously misunderstood tradition.”<sup>19</sup> Kaufmann’s interpretation of the history of philosophy is of course just one of many possible ones and can certainly be disputed, but these remarks at least provide some explanation for what he sees himself doing by writing a book with the specific title that he has chosen. He may be trying to be provocative, but his interpretation suggests that, to be a philosopher at all, one can do no less.

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<sup>17</sup> *Heretic*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

However, Kaufmann does not actually go so far as to say that being heretical is a necessary condition for being a philosopher. He notes that it is but one side of the equation: “In all ages, philosophy contains two different tendencies: one is heretical, iconoclastic, critical; the other is apologetic and conservative.”<sup>20</sup> In his own personal, highly subjective tour of the history of philosophy he points out that the medieval period was the only time when the latter tendency was dominant. Otherwise, every great philosopher of the modern period is remembered primarily for what they argued against rather than what they argued for.<sup>21</sup> As he explains, “Philosophers have rarely given *good* reasons for what was believed previously. Much more often, their denials, their heresies, their exposures of long unquestioned doctrines continue to be taught.”<sup>22</sup> There is a brief consideration of the value of philosophy in an educational context, in which Kaufmann claims that it is far more important to inculcate in a student critical thinking skills than it is to teach them about the specific ideas of philosophers. Such a consideration of the pedagogical function of philosophy then leads Kaufmann into meta-questions about what ultimately is the purpose or goal of philosophy, and he says that “...at its best, philosophy is the quest for honesty.”<sup>23</sup>

The discussion that follows may strike some readers as excessively high-minded or precious, but for Kaufmann this really is a central concern and is effectively his entry-point into a discussion of religion. Recall what he said at the very beginning of the book, that it is difficult to speak *honestly* about religion for long without hurting feelings. The oft-heard folk adage about how one is not supposed to talk about politics or religion in polite company would seem to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 18-19. Kaufmann gives Descartes, Spinoza, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant as the primary examples.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 23.

support this statement, yet at this point Kaufmann proceeds to embark upon an extended meditation on the quality of honesty that seems by turns puzzling and almost obsessive. Consider the following analysis in which he compares two seemingly related moral virtues: “Moral courage and moral honesty are twins, but they are not inseparable, and the trained eye can tell them apart. One may be wonderfully honest with oneself and know that one lacks the moral courage to speak out boldly. And another man may have moral courage but may yet be lax in matters of belief. Moral honesty is even rarer than moral courage.”<sup>24</sup> Kaufmann’s remarks seem plausible up until the last sentence, so plausible that one may even mistakenly include the last sentence in that aura of plausibility. And yet, how exactly would Kaufmann be able to confidently assert such a thing? Is *he* being honest? Whether one agrees or not, his point is that genuine honesty is in fact much harder to come by than we may be conditioned to think. And if it is hard to come by ordinarily, then things only become more complex when religion comes into the picture.

Part of the reason why it is so difficult to be honest about religion is due to its role in public life. Kaufmann gives the following example: “In politics, an avowal of agnosticism would ruin a man’s career, at least in the United States, while a record of repeated and premeditated falsehoods about facts, calumny about rival candidates, and broken promises is not considered any bar to the highest offices the people can bestow.”<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Kaufmann’s statement continues to be as accurate now as it was nearly sixty years ago, although one could object that Kaufmann is merely talking about the vague and ephemeral phenomenon that is public opinion. However, he brings up this issue here as a way of connecting it to other points we have already

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26.

seen him make about the ambiguity of the term “God” and how such ambiguity affects all discourse around the subject. The reason why it is taboo for an American politician to lack a belief in God is due to the fact that “...millions of theists have no clear idea whatsoever about what it means to say that God exists, but feel very sure that it is impious and terrible to say that he does not exist.”<sup>26</sup> For most people, “God” stands as the central term in religion, but as long as that term is undefined, “...what theists agree on is a formulation, not a state of affairs; and this formulation, to cite the admirably candid words of St. Paul about himself, means ‘all things to all men.’”<sup>27</sup> However, Kaufmann is not simply aiming his critical eye at those who profess belief in God. As he makes clear, this ambiguity means that it also makes no sense for a believer to be upset or offended by an unbeliever because “...he [the unbeliever] may merely reject beliefs that they [the believer], too, regard as superstitious.”<sup>28</sup> And furthermore, this also applies to agnosticism:

The agnostic is supposed to be the man who finds that there is not sufficient evidence to be sure either that God does or that God does not exist; so he suspends judgment. But for what is there not sufficient evidence? About what precisely does he suspend judgment? Like most people, he, too, overlooks the staggering ambiguity of that strange formulation, “God exists.” Without determining first what is meant by that, one cannot say in candor whether one believes that it is true, that it is false, or that there is a lack of evidence both ways.<sup>29</sup>

By fully teasing out the implications of the ambiguity of God, Kaufmann shows that it is an even more intractable problem than has heretofore been supposed. One cannot believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment about something ambiguous. If this is the case, then how are we

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 30.



to understand these positions in a coherent way? Kaufmann lays out his own, more “honest” interpretation:

What is at issue, then, is not a question of the existence or non-existence of some entity, as the agnostic, too, supposes when he suspends judgment, pleading insufficient evidence. The issue is rather whether one feels committed to certain formulations; and, assuming that this commitment is not dictated by considerations of social advantage, what is at stake is loyalty to a tradition – not a question of fact.<sup>30</sup>

Kaufmann’s equating of religious belief with allegiance to a specific tradition rather than any kind of implied statement about a metaphysical state of affairs is probably not going to be met with approval or agreement by everyone, but it is at least a clear statement of where he himself stands and will consequently shape much of the rest of the argument that he makes in *Heretic*.

### The Attack on Theology Renewed

This characterization is already evident when Kaufmann begins his more sustained attack on theology and defines his terms:

The first point to note about theology, as the term is generally understood, is that it is denominational. Moreover, a theologian does not merely *expound* the beliefs, particularly those about God, held by his denomination; he also offers a sympathetic exegesis and, in fact if not expressly, a defense. Neither Presbyterian missionaries nor agnostic anthropologists who offer careful expositions of the beliefs of the Navahos would be called Navaho theologians. To be called a theologian, one must be committed to the beliefs about God, or gods, of which one offers an account. By betraying a lack of sympathy, or by evincing hostility, a writer makes clear beyond a doubt that he is not a Navaho theologian or a Christian theologian, even if he should be very “well versed” in Navaho or Christian theology.<sup>31</sup>

As is his style when dealing with these matters, Kaufmann begins with an entirely uncontroversial factual statement about theology being specific to a denomination and then uses that fact to marshal an argument about the unique features of theology that thereby make it

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 93.

questionable. Kaufmann considers theology to be such a *sui generis* enterprise because it is defined not by its content but by the particular stance taken by the person who is doing it, i.e., remaining committed to a particular tradition. But if this commitment is to be maintained above all else, how is true intellectual honesty going to be observed in such an exercise? In order to drive this point home a little more vividly for his particular audience, Kaufmann compares what a theologian does to what a prominent Marxist intellectual like Georg Lukacs does. Kaufmann's choice of Lukacs is significant given that he is a Marxist with a controversial relationship towards the official party line of the Soviet Union. As Kaufmann describes, "...he continually cites authority to back up what he says. Points are proved by quoting Marx, Engels, Lenin, and, depending on the party line around the time of publication, sometimes, but not always, Stalin."<sup>32</sup> There is an implied comparison to the theological method of someone like Thomas Aquinas especially. Kaufmann goes on to further outline the analogy with Lukacs:

Confronted with all this, two reactions are possible. One may say: How perceptive and erudite this writer is! How liberal, really! He almost agrees with me! Of course, he puts all his point in rather odd ways; but, being a Communist, he is doing the best he can. Or one can say: If he is so liberal, why does he not draw out the consequences? Why does he not come out in the open and say what he thinks? For years he did not have to be a Communist; why, then, did he write as he did? The answer is clear: because of his commitment.<sup>33</sup>

By making an analogy to what Kaufmann hopes will be a much more obviously objectionable ideology to his audience, he is trying to highlight how exceptionally odd the methods of theology truly are and how unacceptable it is as an intellectual discipline.

Kaufmann builds his case by considering Bultmann once again. This time, Kaufmann is fascinated by a quote from a dialogue between Bultmann and Jaspers in which Jaspers is highly

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 94.

critical of the overall project of demythologization. In his response to Jaspers' critique, Bultmann says:

He is as convinced as I am that a corpse cannot come back to life or rise from the grave, that there are no demons and no magic causality. But how am I, in my capacity as pastor, to explain, in my sermons and classes, texts dealing with the Resurrection of Jesus in the flesh, with demons, or with magic causality? And how am I, in my capacity as theological scholar, to guide the pastor in his task by my interpretations?<sup>34</sup>

Kaufmann describes these statements as "...a staggering admission."<sup>35</sup> As he explains further, "Now Bultmann let the cat out of the bag, not only about one particular belief but about the nature of theology."<sup>36</sup> One may be tempted to call Kaufmann's description of these remarks, at the very least, uncharitable. And yet, once again, he is putting his finger right on an uncomfortable truth and bringing up a question well worth asking. How are we to understand that one of the most prominent theologians of the twentieth century does not actually believe in the resurrection, at least as it is commonly understood? And how else can it be understood before its meaning is warped beyond recognition? Kaufmann, presumably illustrating the kind of honesty that he has been advocating, gives his own response: "The retort to his [Bultmann's] rhetorical questions need not be the answer he intends. Again one might well say: If you consider false the beliefs in terms of which the institution to which you are committed defines itself, why don't you draw the consequences and renounce your allegiance to the church...?"<sup>37</sup> At this point Kaufmann might as well be quoting Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 66.

<sup>35</sup> *Heretic*, 95.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”<sup>38</sup> In this case, the two masters would appear to be the church and truth.

This leads Kaufmann to more fully develop a criticism that was only hinted at in the *Critique*, the way in which theology is a highly sophisticated form of “...*double-speak*: their utterances are designed to communicate contradictory views to different listeners and readers.”<sup>39</sup> As in the previous book, he is also careful to distinguish between good and bad kinds of ambiguity, making it clear that theology is of the latter variety: “Poetic parables are not necessarily in the least objectionable, but discourse that is ostensibly designed to elucidate them scientifically, while in fact its clarity is of the surface only, and on analysis it turns out to approximate double talk, is quite a different matter.”<sup>40</sup> And one further clarification Kaufmann gives nails down this practice even more specifically, “In double-speak, there is a clear meaning; but there is also a second meaning that contradicts the first.”<sup>41</sup> These would all seem to apply to the remarks of Bultmann just cited, but Kaufmann is also prompted to circle back and reconsider Tillich once again. This time, he directs his attention specifically to Tillich’s book *Dynamics of Faith*, the argument of which he characterizes thus:

In a little over one hundred pages, he redefines such terms as faith and heresy, atheism and revelation. It turns out that the man who accepts the ancient beliefs of Christendom, the Apostles’ Creed, or Luther’s articles of faith may well be lacking faith, while the man who doubts these beliefs but is sufficiently concerned to lie awake nights worrying about it is a paragon of faith.<sup>42</sup>

Here is one such passage from Tillich that Kaufmann takes issue with:

The fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God. It is always present in any act of faith, even if the act of faith includes the denial of God. Where there is ultimate concern, God can be denied only in the name of God. One God can deny the other one. Ultimate

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<sup>38</sup> NRSV.

<sup>39</sup> *Heretic*, 116.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

concern cannot deny its own character as ultimate. Therefore, it affirms what is meant by the word “God.” Atheism, consequently, can only mean the attempt to remove any ultimate concern – to remain unconcerned about the meaning of one’s existence. Indifference toward the ultimate question is the only imaginable form of atheism.<sup>43</sup>

Tillich’s concept of ultimate concern is a way of extending the idea of faith to those who do not necessarily have conventional religious beliefs. As long as one has some sort of concern that “...demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim, and it promises total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name<sup>44</sup>”, then one can be said to be in a state of faith. Such an idea would seem to have the spirit of ecumenism behind it in its attempt to encompass those both within and without the world of religion. Kaufmann, however, sees this as fatally problematic, and refers to it as “conversion by definition,” further remarking that “...to call attention to its occasionally crushing effect on unsuspecting victims, one may christen it the bear’s hug.”<sup>45</sup> This is an especially apt metaphor since it refers to a seemingly benevolent act that is actually quite harmful. While Tillich’s intentions may be perfectly good and noble, Kaufmann sees his efforts as fundamentally dishonest in the way that he redefines terms and introduces different levels of truth into the discussion in a confusing manner.

According to Kaufmann, one such instance of Tillich doing this occurs in the context of a description he gives of the way in which symbols develop on a cultural level:

One should distinguish two stages of literalism, the natural and the reactive. The natural stage of literalism is that in which the mythical and the literal are indistinguishable. The primitive period of individuals and groups consists in the inability to separate the creations of symbolic imagination from the facts which can be verified through observation and experiment. This stage has a full right of its own and should not be disturbed, either in individuals or in groups, up to the moment when man’s questioning mind breaks the natural acceptance of the mythological visions as literal. If, however, this moment has come, two ways are possible. The one is to replace the unbroken by the broken myth. It is the objectively demanded way, although it is impossible for many

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 52.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

people who prefer the repression of their questions to the uncertainty which appears with the breaking of the myth. They are forced into the second stage of literalism, the conscious one, which is aware of the questions but represses them, half consciously, half unconsciously. The tool of repression is usually an acknowledged authority with sacred qualities like the Church or the Bible, to which one owes unconditional surrender. This stage is still justifiable, if the questioning power is very weak and can easily be answered. It is unjustifiable if a mature mind is broken in its personal center by political or psychological methods, split in its unity, and hurt in its integrity.<sup>46</sup>

For Kaufmann, this passage functions much the same as the earlier one cited from Bultmann – a barely concealed admission from a theologian about the utter incoherency of his pursuit. What Tillich is saying is that people go through different stages in their understanding of religious symbols, and one should be sensitive to the particular stage a person is at when trying to address whatever concerns he or she may have. Such suggestions may seem reasonable up to a point, but Kaufmann points out that they become much less so in light of the fact that Tillich redefines crucial terms like “God” and “faith” in such a way “...that when Tillich preaches, writes, or lectures, he is not saying what those who don’t know his definitions think he says.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, rather than simply acknowledging different levels of spiritual awareness, Tillich is in fact creating two different groups, those initiated into his specific theology and those who aren’t, but he is saying the same thing to both audiences. By using the ambiguity of certain religious terms, he “...cultivates a kind of double-speak.”<sup>48</sup> This promotes the following situation:

Literalists thus feel reconfirmed in their beliefs and are pleased that so erudite a man should share their faith, while the initiated realize that Tillich finds the beliefs shared by most of the famous Christians of the past and by millions of Christians in the present utterly untenable; and some unbelievers conclude that unbelief is no reason for renouncing Christianity.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Dynamics of Faith*, 60-61.

<sup>47</sup> *Heretic*, 118.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

In order to finally drive home the point that what Tillich is doing is, in the case of theology, not a bug but a feature, Kaufmann quotes St. Paul, the original Christian theologian, from 1 Corinthians 9:22 – “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”<sup>50</sup> Such a strategy may be effective for evangelizing, but it is completely at odds with Kaufmann’s standards of honesty.

What Kaufmann is most intent to show in this critique is that there is an unsustainable tension at the heart of Christianity, which has to do with its specific history and the way in which its beliefs are formulated. These beliefs may be based on poetic formulations from scripture, but such formulations need to be clarified. Once clarified, they lose the primal power of the ambiguous formulations, and in order to remain plausible to many different groups of people theologians must resort to a different kind of ambiguity in order to keep everyone happy. As Kaufmann explains, this creates a difficult situation:

To understand theology, one has to recognize that pastors and priests, as well as the theologians who train them, work in an environment that is quite different from the universities in which philosophers and scientists pursue their work. The preacher has dissimilar responsibilities and is subjected to different pressures. To put it crudely, he lacks tenure and academic freedom: if he alienates half of his congregation, he is likely to be out of a job.<sup>51</sup>

It would seem that there are certainly circumstances in which it is necessary to define the Christian religion in a certain way to one person, and in another way to another person. When it comes to a calling as sensitive as spiritual counseling, a “one size fits all” approach would never work, and Kaufmann might be unreasonable in suggesting otherwise. He is willing to at least qualify his characterization of Christianity as an inherently theological religion when he grants, “At the very least, large *parts* of the Sermon on the Mount are anti-theological[.] (...) Parts of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 126.

the New Testament seem to say that what ultimately matters is our conduct and not our beliefs, and least of all theology.”<sup>52</sup> However, Kaufmann then notes that this qualification only goes so far, invoking one of his favorite terms in the process: “But the claim that this is *the* message of the New Testament, however dear to many liberals, can be backed up only by gerrymandering.”<sup>53</sup>

What Kaufmann’s argument ultimately amounts to is that Christianity and theology are inseparable, to the detriment of both. He sums this up in a pithy historical summary:

Christianity has always emphasized beliefs that must seem foolish to the uninitiated – a point already made in the oldest part of the New Testament, the Epistles of Paul. Shorn of these beliefs, Christianity ceases to be Christianity and becomes some kind of Reform Judaism or Unitarianism. Christianity defined itself less as a way of life than as a faith which, right from the beginning, involved assent to various propositions.<sup>54</sup>

This method of definition is the key to understanding his singling out of figures like Bultmann and Tillich. If Bultmann says that he does not believe in the literal resurrection, then what is left? If Tillich is so free in his interpretation of key terms in these propositions, then what is the measure of whether or not his interpretations stray into outright heresy? Kaufmann describes the predicament of a modern theologian who feels constrained by loyalty to an ancient tradition by remarking that “...one may conceivably conclude, it is my own tradition that I love best, though I really agree with no more than a fraction of it. And if that is what one does, one may wish to be a Christian, but one is, literally, a heretic.”<sup>55</sup> He then describes another possibility, perhaps a bit more in line with his ideal of honesty: “In the end, a Christian may choose to reject theology – for some of the reasons given here, and for others besides. But in that case he gives up

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 131.



Christianity, though in some laudatory senses of the word he may be a better Christian than some theologians.”<sup>56</sup> These are Kaufmann’s own attempts at the logic-twisting reasoning of the theologians that he attacks so vehemently. But he then suggests a way forward when he notes that, “While these faults are deeply ingrained in theology, it is by no means impossible for a religious person to avoid them. When the Hebrew prophets interpreted their religious heritage, they were not conformists who discovered subtle ways in which they could agree, or seem to agree, with the religion of their day.”<sup>57</sup> This leads into the next major phase of Kaufmann’s critique, which steers away from a specific attack on theology to a comparison of the worldviews of the Old and New Testaments, which will thereby amplify many of the points that Kaufmann has made thus far.

### The Problem of Suffering

In order to fully appreciate the next stage in Kaufmann’s argument, it will be helpful to begin with a passage from a book much later in his career:

For many people the religion in which they are raised *is* religion, and they take no deep interest in other religions. Even those to whom their religion means a great deal rarely know much about its history. They are too close to it to see it as a whole, in depth, in three dimensions, not to speak of four. And religious people used to take for granted that other religions were simply wrong. Then it became fashionable to suppose that all the great religions agree on essentials. This claim, like other dogmas, was not examined closely in the light of facts. The usual approaches to religion are curiously blind. One refuses to see the major religions as alternatives that challenge us to make a choice. Yet Moses and Jesus, Zarathustra and Muhammad presented this challenge in the clearest terms, and we cannot begin to understand the religions of the East as long as we shut our eyes to the ways in which most teachers and scriptures condemn some ways and recommend others. Religions need to be seen as a whole, as living bodies that develop in relation to each other.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Religions in Four Dimensions* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1976), 13.

This is a passage from the introduction of a book entitled *Religions in Four Dimensions*. One of the four dimensions that Kaufmann considers here is the comparative, which is to say that he actually compares religions to one another and sees which traditions might address certain issues of existence *better* than others. As he notes, such an approach is considered to be taboo within the context of modern religious studies, in which an undergraduate taking an Introduction to Religion class might come away with the milquetoast notion that all religions are basically saying the same thing, just in different words. But Kaufmann believes that it is only by seeing the truly distinct and irreconcilable perspectives that different religions offer that one can gain an adequate appreciation of them. He first develops this approach in *Heretic* in his consideration of the widely different emphases within Judaism as compared with Christianity.

He begins the discussion with a brief restatement of some of the points that he made in *Critique* about the problem of trying to prove God philosophically, concluding that the argument is basically a stalemate because each side can always refute the other if a term like God is fundamentally ambiguous. But he then shifts to the problem of suffering, suggesting that once one is confronted with such a concrete issue, all talk about “proving” God all of a sudden becomes quite academic and pointless. If a religion or theology is to truly prove itself true on a deep and existential level, then it needs to address this issue in a compelling way. This is the problem of evil, a perennial concern within the philosophy of religion that many thinkers have tried to solve in one way or another by formulating a theodicy.

Kaufmann briefly considers a couple of ways in which various religious traditions have tried to solve this problem in what he sees as relatively perfunctory ways. There is the case of certain traditions like Confucianism and Taoism that, because they have no real concept of God, claim that everything in the universe is due purely to chance, emphasizing that what is most

important is accepting events as they happen, similar to the ancient Greek philosophy of Stoicism. Such an approach provides an answer as to the actual *cause* of suffering, but makes no attempt to explain *why* suffering happens, so it will only be satisfying to those who are not compelled to ask that question. Then there is the case of traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism that, according to Kaufmann, take the opposite approach of positing strict and iron-clad laws of the universe. In this way, they do provide an answer to the “why” question that the first approach does not, but they are still lacking when it comes to explaining whether or not there is an actual *purpose* behind the suffering. Finally, Kaufmann considers the approach taken by the pagan religion of the ancient Greeks or by Zoroastrianism, which is to posit that the universe is governed by a purpose, but that this purpose does not involve the prevention of suffering.<sup>59</sup>

This survey of strategies is Kaufmann’s way of showing that the problem of suffering can certainly be answered if one takes God out of the equation or if one denies that God is all-good or all-powerful. However, he makes it abundantly clear that if one is committed to both those qualities, then he does not believe that a convincing theodicy can be argued for or maintained. Referring to the traditional concept of an all-good and all-powerful God as “popular theism”, Kaufmann states, “Popular theism is refuted by the existence of so much suffering. The theism preached from thousands of pulpits and credited by millions of believers is disproved by Auschwitz and a billion lesser evils.”<sup>60</sup> Of course, this way of looking at the issue depends upon the assumption of God as a personal being, but Kaufmann believes that once the issue of suffering is faced, all of the philosophical or theological attempts to redefine God in one way or another ultimately ring false as well:

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<sup>59</sup> *Heretic*, 138-139.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

The use of 'God' as a synonym for being-itself, or for the 'pure act of being,' or for nature, or for scores of other things for which other terms are readily available, cannot be disproved but only questioned as pettifoggery. The assertion that God exists, if only God is taken in some such Pickwickian sense, is false, too: not false in the sense of being incorrect, but false in the sense of being misleading and to that extent deceptive.<sup>61</sup>

If Kaufmann's quest for honesty is to be maintained, then suffering must be acknowledged as a real issue that deserves to be considered thoughtfully and sensitively, without the kinds of evasions or qualifications that are generally used to reconcile it with the popular conception of God. And the place in which Kaufmann sees this issue addressed most honestly according to his criteria is in the Old Testament.

This leads into an extremely nuanced and subtle discussion of the ways in which Kaufmann believes that many aspects of the Old Testament have been misunderstood. He describes the basic approach that it takes towards the problem of evil: "In most of the Hebrew Scriptures it is simply axiomatic that suffering comes from God."<sup>62</sup> No attempt is made to sugarcoat the issue or come up with tortured alternative explanations. Rather, the reality of the situation is frankly accepted for what it is, which for Kaufmann is strikingly rare when compared with most other religious traditions. These scriptures are a record of the people of Israel trying to make sense of the many sufferings that they have endured throughout their long history, and a primary means of doing that comes about through the recurring figure of the prophet, one who in his capacity as a representative of God both fully acknowledges the pain of the moment but also offers hope for the future. One such example is Jeremiah: "With his grim realism, Jeremiah did not question the plain fact that those who suffer frequently do not deserve their suffering; but he felt that this was unjust, and he proclaimed that a time shall come when it will not be that way

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 140.

any more.”<sup>63</sup> But an even more important figure for Kaufmann is Ezekiel, whom he sees as an important transitional figure between the Old and New Testament because of the vivid, apocalyptic visions that he had while his people were exiled in Babylon. At this most hopeless time for the people of Israel, Ezekiel was able to offer them hope by sheer dint of his unique gifts as a visionary:

If Ezekiel had told his people that they would one day return from their Babylonian exile and rebuild their temple, they might well have laughed at him. No other people had ever returned from this kind of exile, and the memory of the destruction of the northern kingdom, Israel, was still fresh: Samaria had been razed by the Assyrians, the people had been exiled, and the ten tribes had been lost forever. But Ezekiel *saw* the rebuilt temple – saw it in such minute detail that he could go on and on describing it and giving measurements. He could see even now what was to be, and many people believed him; and later on, no doubt, some insisted on rebuilding the temple just as he had described it.<sup>64</sup>

After this description, Kaufmann goes on to sum up what is so significant about this prophet in particular: “With Ezekiel, the Ought took precedence over the Is, even to the extent of a flat defiance of everyday realities.”<sup>65</sup> His assurance of the justice of God was so complete that he was able to communicate it to others in a compelling way no matter what doubts they may have had. However, Kaufmann then describes the mixed consequences of this situation on the development of Judaism as a religion:

It takes only one further step, and we are assured that, appearances notwithstanding, God is just – not merely that ‘in those days,’ in some distant future, things will change and God will become just, but that even now he is just. The New Testament assures us, climaxing a development that began in exilic Judaism: God is perfect. He is not unjust. (...) It is at this point that the perplexing problem of suffering is created and at the same time rendered insoluble[.]<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 145.

So, at least in the context of the Hebrew scriptures, the problem of suffering originates from a very real and pressing concern among the people of Israel to find the strength to endure present hardships. However, it is very difficult to suggest that there is a light at the end of the tunnel without also sacrificing an intellectually coherent worldview for emotional comfort.

Kaufmann next considers a number of ways in which this tradition has attempted to address the problem of suffering, referring to all of them as mere “pseudo-solutions.” First, there is the positing of a purely malevolent being, Satan, to explain the existence of evil, a concept which came about through the influence of the dualistic Persian religion of Zoroastrianism with which the people of Israel came into contact during their exile. But this just raises the question of why God allows Satan to commit evil, so this does not solve the problem but merely defers it. The second pseudo-solution is to posit some kind of afterlife in which all of the wrongs of this world will be righted. This becomes the dominant strategy in Judaism’s successor religion. The problem with this is that it both conflicts with God’s omnipotence and it does not actually address the problem of suffering, as Kaufmann makes clear in the following example:

Suppose that Anne Frank enjoys eternal bliss in heaven: should an omnipotent god have found it impossible to let her have eternal bliss without first making her a victim of the Nazis and without having her die in a concentration camp? If you treat a child unfairly, it may possibly forget about it if you afterward give it a lollipop, but *injustice remains injustice*.<sup>67</sup> [my emphasis]

Finally, one could simply assert that everyone actually does get what he or she deserves, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. These are all familiar strategies that Kaufmann goes over, but his ultimate point in doing so is to further highlight what he considers to be the most exceptional and powerful text in the Hebrew Bible when it comes to dealing with the problem of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 147.

suffering, the Book of Job, which "...rejects the first of these pseudo-solutions out of hand, refuses to take up the second, and repudiates the third emphatically."<sup>68</sup>

### The Book of Job

The story of Job begins with a gentleman's bet between God and Satan that if a number of increasingly tragic hardships befall the prosperous Job, he will turn away from God and curse him. While the character of Satan is certainly pivotal in causing the events that unfold, "...it does not occur to anybody even to try to solve the problem of suffering by pointing to Satan. God's omnipotence is never questioned, and all concerned apparently realize that no reference to Satan can explain Job's suffering without in effect denying either God's justice or his omnipotence."<sup>69</sup> So, this is the way in which the first pseudo-solution mentioned by Kaufmann is dispensed with quite easily. But what is most striking to Kaufmann in the text is what happens after Job's friends come to comfort him, telling him that he must have done something to bring about the events that have happened to him:

Job refuses to accept their reasoning. He never questions either God's existence or his omnipotence; but God's justice, mercy, and goodness he not only questions but denies outright. This is a highly unusual approach to the problem: almost all Christian theologians and philosophers who have dealt with the problem of suffering have clung to God's moral perfection while in effect, though hardly ever admittedly, they have denied his omnipotence.<sup>70</sup>

What Kaufmann is emphasizing here is what is most likely the reason that the book of Job is a difficult text for many people. Besides simply telling the story of a good man who has bad things happen to him, it maintains the omnipotence of God while denying his omnibenevolence. In most discussions of the problem of evil, when considering the irreconcilable triad of propositions

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

(1. God is all-good, 2. God is all-powerful, 3. Evil exists) it is almost never the first proposition that is questioned. At most, “all-good” might be slightly reinterpreted, as in the case of Leibniz’s theodicy that we live in the best of all possible worlds despite evidence to the contrary. But Kaufmann is pointing out that to simply deny it is unusually bold, and the power of the story of Job might in fact come from its radical honesty.

Where this honesty most comes into play for Kaufmann is in the explicit denial of that third pseudo-solution that was mentioned, that everyone gets what they deserve. The majority of the book, Job’s dialogue with his friends, addresses this quite explicitly. Within this dialogue, Kaufmann locates Job’s most explicit denial of God in the seventh chapter:

Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;  
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;  
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.  
Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me?  
When I say, ‘My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint,’  
then you scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions,  
so that I would choose strangling and death rather than this body.  
I loathe my life; I would not live forever.  
Let me alone, for my days are a breath.  
What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
that you set your mind on them,  
visit them every morning, test them every moment?  
Will you not look away from me for a while,  
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?  
If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?  
Why have you made me your target?  
Why have I become a burden to you?  
Why do you not pardon my transgression  
and take away my iniquity?  
For now I shall lie in the earth;  
you will seek me, but I shall not be.<sup>71</sup>

Job is defiant, but he is also asking questions of God that are quite legitimate, and he feels that he is more than entitled to answers. Kaufmann stresses the importance of fully understanding Job’s

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<sup>71</sup> Job 7:11-21, NRSV.



position in this exchange: “Job does not say that he has done evil but insists that, even if he had, this would not justify God’s treatment of him. If a child has done wrong, a loving father has no excuse for tormenting him cruelly without respite. Centuries in advance, Job replies to generations of philosophers and theologians.”<sup>72</sup> When it comes to human standards of justice, we feel that if a punishment is to be given, it should fit the crime. In Job’s case, no crime justifies the supposed “punishment” that he is receiving, especially if it involves his children being killed. There is also an assumption on Kaufmann’s part that if God were truly all-good then he should be above using an all too human practice like retributive punishment anyway.<sup>73</sup>

Because of its structure as a kind of fable or parable, the book of Job is markedly different from much of the rest of the Old Testament which purports to tell the actual history of the people of Israel. Nevertheless, Kaufmann is intent to connect Job’s perspective with other aspects of the Hebrew Bible, especially the prophetic tradition. He sees this as evident especially in Job’s responses to the well-meaning but ultimately implausible explanations of his friends. As Kaufmann observes: “Job, like the early prophets, has no patience with the utopian religion that divorces God from reality and uses the name of God as a synonym for moral perfection. He echoes Amos’ ‘Does evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it?’ The innocent suffer and the wicked flourish, and Job insists that God is responsible: ‘If it is not he, then who is it?’”<sup>74</sup> Once again, God’s utter omnipotence is asserted, but at the expense of his omnibenevolence. The stance that Job takes is perhaps the archetype of righteous indignation, and it culminates in his

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>73</sup> One of Kaufmann’s later books, *Without Guilt and Justice*, is largely concerned with giving a sustained critique of retributive justice.

<sup>74</sup> *Heretic*, 152.

challenge to God and his “negative confession” in which he proclaims his moral uprightness and continual refrain from sin:

If I have withheld anything that the poor desired,  
or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,  
or have eaten my morsel alone,  
and the orphan has not eaten from it -  
for from my youth I reared the orphan like a father,  
and from my mother’s womb I guided the widow -  
if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing,  
or a poor person without covering,  
whose loins have not blessed me,  
and who was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep;  
if I have raised my hand against the orphan,  
because I saw I had supporters at the gate;  
then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder,  
and let my arm be broken from its socket.  
For I was in terror of calamity from God,  
and I could not have faced his majesty.<sup>75</sup>

The section from which this excerpt is taken constitutes the last words spoken by Job before God offers his response out of the whirlwind. The conventional interpretation is that God humbles Job with his immense power, and there is even a temptation to interpret Job as one who “protests too much” and deserves such a humbling because of his confidence in his own goodness. Kaufmann, however, cautions against such an interpretation:

To take offense at Job’s conviction of his own righteousness and to suppose that for that he after all deserved his afflictions is surely to miss the point of the book and to side with his friends: Job is not presented to us as a historic figure but as a character who is, as we are assured at the outset in the words of the Lord, “blameless”; and the Lord adds that “there is none like him on the earth.” Nor does the Lord, when he finally speaks from the whirlwind, accuse Job of any sin. The point is clearly that even if there were a human being who had never done any wrong at all and who was “eyes to the blind and feet to the lame,” there would not be any reason at all to suppose that he would be less likely than others to come down with some dreadful disease or to suffer unspeakable torments.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Job, 31:16-23, NRSV.

<sup>76</sup> *Heretic*, 153.

The book of Job is problematic for many people, much like the “problem plays” of Shakespeare that do not fit neatly into any one genre. Many pastors do not know what to do with it, and if it is a book that continues to be studied in literature classes then that is ostensibly because it is so richly ambiguous and capable of multiple interpretations. But what Kaufmann is trying to do here is to thoroughly demystify it. For him, what is so powerful about the book of Job is that it presents a completely plausible and recognizable scenario – that of a good person experiencing hardship for no reason. We are all familiar with this, but we would like to pretend that we are not, so we scratch our heads when we encounter Job’s story. But it is not the story of Job that is puzzling, but rather life itself. As Kaufmann observes concerning God’s response to Job:

Far from insisting that there is some hidden justice in the world after all, or from claiming that everything is really rational if only we look at it intelligently, God goes out of his way to point out how utterly weird ever so many things are. He says in effect: the problem of suffering is no isolated problem; it fits a pattern; the world is not so rational as Job’s comforters suppose; it is uncanny.

This even extends to the infamous “happy ending,” in which God restores Job’s wealth to him and blesses him with the same number of children that he had previously lost. For many people, this ending seems wildly inconsistent and rings false, but Kaufmann maintains that even this ending can be reconciled with the rest, pointing out that “...the book does not say or imply that this vindicates God’s mercy or justice, or that Job felt that his second set of ten children was fair compensation for the first. (...) It underlines the weirdness of the ways of this world, which is nothing less than grotesque.”<sup>77</sup> Kaufmann sees the Book of Job as anticipating themes that would not be seen as vividly again until the writings of existentialism-adjacent figures like Dostoevsky and Kafka.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

There is another point about the Book of Job that Kaufmann wants to make regarding it as a representation of the overall ethic of the Old Testament. As we have already seen, it is a text that explicitly rejects a simplistic transactional account of morality – one does good, one is rewarded; one does bad, one is punished. Such a view, while perhaps logical, flies in the face of the ordinary experience of most people. As Kaufmann elaborates:

[I]t is accepted as a commonplace that the ethic of the Old Testament is an ethic of prudence and rewards, as if the point were that it pays to be good. Clearly, it is the whole point of the Book of Job that this is not so, but Protestant scholars and preachers have often claimed that Job's friends represent the ethic of the Old Testament. This is rather like claiming that the sinners in Dante's *Inferno* represent the Christian virtues.<sup>78</sup>

Of course, this is merely one book among a large collection of scriptures and its viewpoint may well be an outlier, but Kaufmann claims that, once again, this kind of response is merely due to fundamental misunderstandings that have crept up around the Old Testament due to superficial readings and interpretations:

To be sure, we encounter perennial appeals to the consequences of moral and immoral conduct, but in the overwhelming majority of cases it is the nation that stands to profit or to suffer, not the individual. The dominant ethic of the Old Testament does not invite comparison with the ethic of the Roman church but rather with the ethic of ancient republican Rome: the individual is expected to subordinate his own pleasure and profit to the interests of the commonwealth; it is presupposed that ethical conduct involves such unselfishness.<sup>79</sup>

This ethic is one that Kaufmann will develop in much more detail in later sections, but he introduces it at this point to make a preliminary contrast with the New Testament, in which he observes that "...in the Gospels this ancient appeal to selflessness is no longer encountered; it is presupposed that every soul is concerned with how *he* may enter the kingdom of heaven; and prudence has come to mean enlightened selfishness."<sup>80</sup> Obviously, such a bold claim necessitates

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

an extended argument which will be considered later as well, but it is helpful at this point to at least see what Kaufmann's basic thesis statement is about these two traditions as a means of understanding what is to come. It is also significant that Kaufmann begins his analysis of the Old Testament ethic with a consideration of the Book of Job. As will become clear, he is basically saying that the popular conception of the Old Testament God as a harsh and vengeful figure who was subsequently softened in the New Testament is based not only upon an incorrect view of the facts but also on a fundamentally flawed perspective that tries to solve the problem of suffering rather than face it for what it truly is.

### The Distinctive Ethic of the Old Testament

In his discussion of the portrayal of God in the Book of Job, at one point Kaufmann notes, "What is said to him and by him amounts to a radical repudiation of popular theism; but when the book was written, another, older tradition was still available, could still be appealed to, was still understood. Today this older tradition seems buried. One can no longer count on its being remembered when one speaks of God."<sup>81</sup> Kaufmann now attempts to revive this tradition by looking more closely at the Hebrew Bible and the many ways in which it has been misunderstood and caricatured, having been regarded within the paradigm of much of the Christian world as a set of writings that, while respected, has also ultimately been superseded. He seeks to draw out the valuable ethical insights and what he regards as a more nuanced and realistic portrait of God, in line once again with his quest for honesty. As Kaufmann claims, "The only theism worthy of our respect believes in God not because of the way the world is made but in spite of that."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 168.

Kaufmann begins his discussion of the Old Testament more generally by pointing out a number of unique features about the culture of ancient Israel, primary among them being the way in which they differed so dramatically from neighboring cultures. The first case he considers is ancient Egypt, identifying three major concerns of this culture that are absent from that of Israel. The Egyptians had a rich tradition of visual arts, both painting and sculpture, whereas these pursuits were forbidden by the laws of Moses. The Egyptians were also very much concerned with the afterlife, to the point of constructing giant pyramids as tombs to bury their pharaohs, whereas there is no explicit reference to any kind of afterlife in the earliest scriptures of ancient Israel. Finally, the Egyptian religion is not only polytheistic, but portrays the numerous gods as being half-human and half-animal, whereas the ancient Israelite concept of god is single and decidedly neither zoomorphic nor anthropomorphic. Kaufmann concludes, “These three differences are not only obvious: they far outweigh any similarities.”<sup>83</sup> His point is to demonstrate that, in light of what we know about how most historical cultures in close proximity have at least some amount of influence upon one another, the fact that this is not the case vis-à-vis Egypt and Israel suggests that in fact Israel self-consciously modeled itself as a reaction against the practices of Egypt, and this is an important factor in understanding its subsequent development. Kaufmann shows this to be the case even in light of the apparent similarity of the monotheism of ancient Israel to that of the pharaoh Ikhnoton who promoted the worship of the sun god as the one and only true god. As he explains, this is the apparent exception that in fact proves the rule:

Hebrew monotheism cannot be understood as a quantitative reduction of any traditional polytheism or as an exclusive declaration of loyalty to one of the established gods: all the established gods of the nations are set aside, and the whole lot of them is considered beneath comparison with God, who not only does not happen to be identified with the sun

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 174.

but who is not at all an object in this world. No object in this world deserves worship: not the sun and moon and stars, which Plato, many centuries later, still considered divine; not the Pharaoh nor any other human being; nor any animal. Only God who is utterly unlike anything in the world.<sup>84</sup>

So, the innovation of ancient Israel goes beyond the mere positing of a single god, and the full significance of this can only be appreciated when one considers how close, and yet so far, other cultures came to this.

Kaufmann then moves on to a comparison of the laws of Moses with another code of laws that is closely connected in many peoples' minds with the ethic of the Old Testament, those of the Babylonian king, Hammurabi. Indeed, Hammurabi's code, especially its famous statement of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," is considered to be all but identical with the underlying tenets of the Torah. But Kaufmann patiently and carefully lays out the numerous differences behind the apparent similarities:

The two central principles of Hammurabi's code are, first, *ius talionis* (the conception that justice in criminal cases consists in precise retaliation) and, secondly, that the law *is* a respecter of persons and that different standards must be applied to people of different social status. Both of these principles are anathema to most contemporary penologists, and retaliation is widely considered all but synonymous with the Law of Moses. (...) [B]oth of these principles have a common presupposition: they distinguish insufficiently between human beings and material objects. And the crucial difference between the Code of Hammurabi and the Law of Moses is that in the latter the unique worth of man as such is proclaimed and implicit – for the first time in human history.<sup>85</sup>

Kaufmann does not always follow his strong claims with a lengthy textual analysis supporting them, but in this case he does. I will merely quote one of the specific comparisons he makes to support his point. Here he begins by describing a law in Hammurabi's code and then contrasts it with the law of Moses:

The man who has destroyed an eye or broken a bone of another man's slave has to pay one half his value: he merely has to compensate the owner for the damage done to his

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 179.

property. In the same vein, there is no penalty whatsoever for destroying an eye or breaking a bone of one's own slave. This should be compared with Exodus 21:20<sup>86</sup> and 21:26ff.,<sup>87</sup> here the man who as much as breaks a tooth of his own slave must let him go free for his tooth. In the Law of Moses, the slave is first of all a human being and has to be treated as such.<sup>88</sup>

This is a clear enough contrast, although if one consults the verse right after the first one cited by Kaufmann in Exodus, 21:21, one finds: "But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property."<sup>89</sup> This verse seems to provide a direct challenge to some of the claims that Kaufmann has just made. However, this can be answered by another point that Kaufmann is intent to make clear: "In the Law of Moses, being a slave is an accidental condition. This is further emphasized by constant reminders that the children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt themselves and should therefore know how it feels to be a slave."<sup>90</sup> So, while the fact of slavery is acknowledged, it is presented in a different light than in Hammurabi's code. Furthermore, Kaufmann also grants that the specific language of the Babylonian code is even used sometimes in the Old Testament, but with a twist: "The law of talion, to be sure, appears in the Law of Moses, too, but in an almost polemical manner. The Mosaic phrase, 'an eye for an eye,' might be said to conceal a revaluation of Hammurabi's values."<sup>91</sup> So, despite some cultural influence and a handful of surface similarities, the laws of Moses differ from the harsher laws of the Babylonians in a number of distinct and significant ways which Kaufmann

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<sup>86</sup> When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. (NRSV)

<sup>87</sup> When a slaveowner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. If the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth. (NRSV)

<sup>88</sup> *Heretic*, 179.

<sup>89</sup> NRSV

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.



uses to demonstrate that they are eminently humane not merely in comparison, but also taken on their own merits.

Throughout this analysis, Kaufmann is always intent to show that the surprisingly forward-thinking, even modern ethical principles in the Old Testament are a natural outgrowth of the unique conception of God within it. Because God is not represented in any kind of conventional way, either through images or specifically descriptive words or phrases, the emphasis is always first and foremost on the relationship between God and human beings:

The relation of God to man is of the essence of the religion of the Old Testament. This religion is not metaphysical, not speculative, not mythical: it does not concern itself with the nature of God as he may be, as it were, in himself; it does not speculate about his activities before the creation of the world or, quite generally, insofar as they do not affect man; it does not relate myths about his private life. The religion of the Old Testament is concerned with God only as a Thou, only as related to man, only as addressing man and as addressable by man. His deeds are a subject of concern and related only insofar as they constitute an address to man. Of other deeds, nothing is said: God is not an object of interest, study, or entertainment.<sup>92</sup>

Notice that Kaufmann is emphasizing what the Old Testament does *not* say about God. In other words, what is notably absent from the Old Testament is *theology* in any conventional sense of the term. While God is certainly a major presence throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the lack of speculation about who or what God is leads to a more humanistic focus, both in terms of the stories and in the formation of ethical principles. God being related to yet utterly distinct from mankind implies a certain notion of equality among human beings that was completely foreign to the other cultures that were contemporaneous with the Israelites. Kaufmann identifies the key feature that develops out of this kind of ethic: “In the religion of the Old Testament a keen social conscience is central. (...) And in the Old Testament this social conscience is by no means

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 185.

unrelated to the belief in God: rather, it is the most significant implication of this belief.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, the admirable ethic of the Old Testament is a consequence of its untheological outlook. So understood, one can better understand the motivation behind Kaufmann’s attack on theology.

This ethic is also very much intertwined with the prophetic tradition, in which certain individuals periodically rise up to remind the nation of Israel about these moral principles whenever there is a time when they have fallen away from observing them. Kaufmann stresses that it is important to recognize the unique status these figures have as those who speak for God but do not claim any kind of divine status for themselves, and also notes that “...not one of the prophets makes the slightest claim to be an innovator: all remind the people of what they have long known and rebuke them for unthinkingly betraying standards and ideas long accepted.”<sup>94</sup> These ideas ultimately go back to Moses himself, the man who comes closest to being considered the “founder” of Judaism as a religion. But what Kaufmann finds especially significant in this case is that, unlike the founder of just about every other religion, there is no record of Moses ever being worshipped as a god, and this is once again related to the distinctive features that he finds in the ethic of the Old Testament: “In Israel, no man was ever worshiped or accorded even semidivine status. This is one of the most extraordinary facts about the religion of the Old Testament and by far the most important reason for the Jews’ refusal to accept Christianity and the New Testament.”<sup>95</sup> What Kaufmann seems to be hinting at here is the way in which the corrupting influence of power can often be seen most strikingly in the development of religious traditions, and how the nation of Israel represents a notable and striking exception to

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 186-187.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

this tendency. Once a particular individual is recognized as a god or at least as infallible as one, then their memory can be manipulated by their followers in various ways. Factions can rise up which claim that only they understood the true message of the founder. There are many cases of other religious traditions with founders who recognized these dangers and tried to forestall them, but were not as successful: “Why, then, was Moses never deified or worshiped – unlike Lao-tze, Confucius, and the Buddha and the Jina, and the Pharaohs of Egypt? The most obvious explanation is that he himself impressed his people with the firm idea that no human being is divine in any sense in which the rest of mankind isn’t.”<sup>96</sup> So, while Kaufmann acknowledges that the Old Testament is not necessarily the only tradition with this humanistic message, it is the only one in which this message truly endured.

There is one more point to mention in Kaufmann’s consideration of the Old Testament because it is a response to what could be a major objection to the aspects that he has covered so far. Even if one grants the claims that Kaufmann has made about the ethic of the Old Testament as one that promotes the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humanity, these themes would seem to be largely cancelled out by an exclusivist dimension within it as well, as evidenced in the continual refrain of the people of Israel as God’s “chosen people.” In introducing this point Kaufmann already expresses a degree of pre-emptive indignation at the way in which this kind of criticism is evidence of a certain double standard at work: “It has become fashionable to ignore whatever in the New Testament may seem unedifying, especially the many passages on hell and eternal torment, while emphasizing out of all proportion whatever in the Old Testament is questionable from a moral point of view.”<sup>97</sup> Once again, as with the case of the resemblance of

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 193.

the laws of Moses to Hammurabi's code, Kaufmann believes that this is a case of people paying undue attention to the surface meaning of language rather than looking at the overall context in which it occurs. While the Old Testament is undoubtedly a record of God "choosing" one specific people as his nation, this is not to be interpreted to mean that there is anything unique about this people that qualifies them for some kind of special treatment. On the contrary, "...the idea of the chosen people is not offered by way of justifying lower moral standards" but rather "...is inseparably linked with the twin ideas of a task and of an especially demanding law."<sup>98</sup> As Kaufmann goes on to clarify, "What matters is not the glory of the people: most of them, almost generation after generation, shall be destroyed. What matters is the task: maintaining and spreading what has been revealed to them, namely, the belief in God and the morality that goes with it."<sup>99</sup> So the expression "chosen people" merely refers to the specific people that God has chosen, perhaps arbitrarily, to promote the specifically "...supra-nationalistic, cosmopolitan, humanistic" ethic that has been outlined so far.<sup>100</sup> As far as textual evidence for this point is concerned, Kaufmann points to the book of Ruth, in which a woman from the foreign city of Moab becomes an ancestor of King David, and the book of Jonah, in which the wicked city of Nineveh is spared simply because the people repent.<sup>101</sup> Both of these are clear cases where being well outside of the "chosen people" makes no difference as far as God is concerned, which is the point that Kaufmann wants to drive home.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 193-194.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 195-196.

## Kaufmann on Jesus and his Interpreters

Given what has been said about Kaufmann's perspectives on Judaism and Christianity so far, it is hardly surprising that, in his shift from a consideration of the Old Testament to the New, he adopts a highly polemical tone complete with dramatic juxtapositions. On the one hand: "The problem of happiness is scarcely considered in the Old Testament. Man is destined to be free. Whether liberty will make him happy is somehow beside the point. What matters is God's will, God's challenge."<sup>102</sup> On the other: "In the New Testament, each man's overruling concern with his eternal happiness – his salvation – is central and defines the whole milieu."<sup>103</sup> This basic contrast, between a communal ethic of social justice and an individual ethic of eternal salvation, is Kaufmann's paradigm for the Old and New Testaments. One may regard this interpretation as simplistic or fatally flawed in numerous ways, but it is difficult to deny that Kaufmann at least does make an extensive argument for it, and one that turns out to be quite convincing. In his consideration of the Christian side of the equation, he considers not just the teachings of Jesus and Paul, but also goes beyond the New Testament to consider two later interpreters he considers to be representative and illustrative of fundamental flaws in the Christian worldview, Martin Luther and Albert Schweitzer.

Unlike many other critics of Christianity, Kaufmann does not try to make the case that the original teachings of Jesus represent some kind of idyllic and noble ethic that was corrupted by subsequent interpreters. On the contrary, Kaufmann sees the problems with Christianity as beginning with Jesus himself, and if anything, these initial problems made later interpretive offshoots all but inevitable. Because Kaufmann sees the primary concern in Jesus' teachings as

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

that of the individual's salvation, the best-case scenario is an ethic of enlightened selfishness.

Wherever matters may seem to be otherwise, Kaufmann demonstrates that these are holdovers from the Old Testament:

But does not Jesus give a central place to the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself"? It has often been said that this is the essential difference between the New Testament and the Old. Yet this commandment is taken from the Law of Moses, and the New Testament itself designates this as the ground that Jesus and the Pharisees had in common.<sup>104</sup>

So, the primary innovation of the morality of the New Testament as found in Jesus' teachings is a change in emphasis that leads to a consequent change in motivation. This emphasis upon salvation also means that the ethic is focused upon another world rather than this one, such that all seemingly unselfish actions that are prescribed are colored by this new direction as well: "In the Gospels, one is to lose oneself only to find *oneself*. Sacrifices are demanded, but only of what moth and rust consume. We are taught to give up what is of no account. In what truly matters, we are expected to see to our own interest. The 'reward' is always *my* reward."<sup>105</sup> Kaufmann also makes an effort to show that he himself is not "gerrymandering" in his selection of passages by making reference to other prominent Christian thinkers who would seem to support this aspect of his interpretation. He cites Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church*: "He [Troeltsch] does not overstate the case when he calls Jesus' moral teachings, as recorded in the Gospels, 'unlimited and unconditional individualism'; when he remarks that 'of an ideal for humanity there is no thought'; or when he claims that 'any program of social renovation is lacking' (39, 41, 48)."<sup>106</sup> Kaufmann elsewhere emphasizes this "prudential" ethic of the New

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 211-212. Kaufmann is citing Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyan (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

Testament and shows that, despite efforts to downplay it, prominent scholars within the tradition have had to begrudgingly grant that it is there:

This conclusion is utterly unpalatable to most Protestant theologians. To their minds “prudence” is a word of reproach. And yet Guenther Bornkamm, a German professor of theology at Heidelberg who is close to Bultmann, has to admit in his monograph on *Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament*: “the New Testament does not know the idea of the good deed that has its value in itself.”<sup>107</sup>

These citations are Kaufmann’s way of showing that he is aware that he is not making his interpretation in a vacuum. And yet, the fact that other Christian scholars agree with his reading makes him all the more perplexed, not to mention indignant, that these aspects of Jesus’ message have not been sufficiently emphasized within the tradition.

In his analysis, Kaufmann proceeds to reevaluate a number of common conceptions of the way in which Jesus’ teachings are understood in relation to the Jewish tradition. For example, he goes so far as to criticize the Golden Rule<sup>108</sup>, which is almost universally accepted as a valuable moral principle from Jesus’ teachings by both the religious and the non-religious alike. There is some basic version of the Golden Rule in just about every major religious tradition, but they can take slightly different forms and Kaufmann wants to show that the specific differences can sometimes make all of the difference. One alternative version he mentions is the one formulated by Hillel the Elder, a prominent Jewish sage who was roughly a contemporary of Jesus. There is the famous story of someone asking Hillel to explain the Torah while standing on one foot, to which he responds, “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the

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<sup>107</sup> *Critique*, 297. Kaufmann gives his own English translation of an untranslated German monograph, but it is an accurate translation of the sentence that reads in the original: “Hier ist nun allerdings mit Nachdruck zu sagen, daß das N.T. die Idee der guten Tat, die ihren Wert in sich selbst trägt, nicht kennt.” The original monograph is Guenther Bornkamm, *Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament* (Lüneberg: Heliand-Verlag, 1947).

<sup>108</sup> Matthew 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (NRSV)

entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation.”<sup>109</sup> Kaufmann notes that among Christians, especially Protestant theologians, this version is often referred to as the “Silver Rule,” the implication of course being that it is an inferior version of Jesus’ saying, but Kaufmann challenges this notion, pointing out that “...the negative version can be put into practice while the positive version cannot; and anyone who tried to live up to Jesus’ rule would become an insufferable nuisance.”<sup>110</sup> So, while Jesus’ version may sound more elegant because it is not formulated negatively, it turns out that it may in fact be much less helpful as an applicable moral principle. According to Kaufmann, this aspect of Jesus’ teachings becomes even more evident in his specific commentary on and intensification of the law, of which the following passage provides a well-known example:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.<sup>111</sup>

This sort of language can be interpreted in many ways. It can be seen as a basic statement that no one is free from sin, or it could be read as a way in which Jesus “builds a wall around the Torah” by shifting guidelines so that people will not even come close to breaking the laws within them. But Kaufmann sees two basic problems with this rhetoric if it is to be used as any kind of guide to morality. First, it is so overly dramatic that it tends to lead to a deemphasis in clear-cut principles to be followed: “Parable and hyperbole define his style. Specific contents are disparaged.”<sup>112</sup> And second, this lack of content actually leads to a kind of moral nihilism:

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<sup>109</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

<sup>110</sup> *Heretic*, 212.

<sup>111</sup> Matthew 5:27-30 (NRSV)

<sup>112</sup> *Heretic*, 213.



On reflection, the old morality is not protected but undermined, not extended but dissolved; and no new morality is put in its place. Where murder is not considered importantly different from calling a man a fool, nor adultery from a lustful look, the very basis of morality is denied: *the crucial distinction between impulse and action*. [my emphasis] If one is unfortunate enough to have the impulse, no reason is left for not acting on it.<sup>113</sup>

So, while Jesus can be seen as a reformer who shifted attention away from the ritualistic elements of the law of Moses, Kaufmann shows that in doing so he also demonstrated a lack of concern with the finer points of morality such that he created a fundamentally unworkable ethic. If one is concerned with the world beyond rather than this one, then what sort of practical ethical guidelines are left?

As far as Kaufmann is concerned, the case of Paul merely illustrates the further development of these problems. There is a common conception among many that Paul somehow betrayed the original message of Jesus, effectively rendering him "...the real Judas."<sup>114</sup> Kaufmann pushes back against such an interpretation, claiming that all that Paul did was follow the implications of Jesus' teachings about the world and about himself to their logical conclusion, thereby turning these into statements in which people could definitively claim belief: "If individual salvation counts for everything and is conceived as otherworldly; if action is deprived of its significance and the distinction between deed and impulse is dissolved, what remains but faith in the person around whom the lines were drawn, faith that he was the Messiah, the Christ?"<sup>115</sup> It will once again be interesting to compare what Kaufmann is saying here with Nietzsche's remarks about Paul in *The Antichrist*:

On the heels of the "glad tidings" came the *very worst*: those of Paul. In Paul was embodied the opposite type to that of the "bringer of glad tidings": the genius in hatred, in the vision of hatred, in the inexorable logic of hatred. *How much* this dysangelist

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 218.

sacrificed to hatred! Above all, the Redeemer: he nailed him to *his own* cross. The life, the example, the doctrine, the death, the meaning and the right of the entire evangel – nothing remained once this hate-inspired counterfeiter realized what alone he could use. *Not* the reality, *not* the historical truth!<sup>116</sup>

Kaufmann never specifically mentions Nietzsche in this section but, considering that he translated the very passage just quoted, he must have been thinking of these remarks at least on a subconscious level because many of Kaufmann's claims seem like a direct rejoinder to Nietzsche. He denies any kind of malicious intent behind Paul's actions: "Paul did not villainously overturn the purest teaching that the world had ever heard: he filled a vacuum."<sup>117</sup>

As he elaborates:

Never having heard the preaching *of* Jesus, he felt free to develop a new teaching *about* Jesus; and he transformed a message of parables and hyperboles into a theological religion. What he said was clearly different from what Jesus had said; but Jesus' teaching had been so utterly elusive that neither Peter nor James, the brother of Jesus, nor the other disciples who had listened to him day after day were able to point to anything clear or definite to combat Paul.<sup>118</sup>

By toning down the level of vitriol as compared with Nietzsche, Kaufmann is able to construct a more plausible interpretation of what happened in the early days of Christianity while also going far beyond Nietzsche's position to place the blame at the fundamentally vague (as opposed to ambiguous) message at the heart of Jesus' teachings.

Nevertheless, Kaufmann does assign some blame to Paul, but it has to do with the introduction of the primacy of dogma into the Christian religion. As established, Jesus left the door open for such an innovation to happen, yet that does not mean that he is responsible for the specific developments that happened afterwards, and Kaufmann sees a certain oddity at work here: "What is ironical, though there are parallels, is that Jesus' dissatisfaction with all formulas

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<sup>116</sup> *Portable Nietzsche*, 617.

<sup>117</sup> *Heretic*, 220.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

and rules should have given way within one generation to an attempt, not yet concluded, to define the most precise dogmas.”<sup>119</sup> By trying to curb the excesses of Judaism, Jesus unfortunately made possible other excesses, and “...the hypocrisy possible within a legalism that prominently emphasizes love and justice is as a mote compared to the beam of the hypocrisy made possible where dogma and sacraments have become central.”<sup>120</sup> These excesses are realized in Paul’s interpretation of the Christian message which places at its center Jesus’ death on the cross as the only path to the forgiveness of sins. Kaufmann argues that such a message goes completely against the message of the Old Testament, especially the book of Jonah which he emphasizes again and again as a central text for a more humane, pre-Christian perspective on the forgiveness of sins. This is where Paul’s radical division with his original religion is most apparent:

If, as the rabbis were still teaching in Paul’s day, God could at any time freely forgive repentant sinners, Paul’s theology collapsed and, in his own words, “then Christ died in vain.” (Galatians 2:21). If God could freely forgive the men of Nineveh simply because they repented of their wicked ways, though they had not been converted, circumcised, or baptized – and this is the teaching of the book of Jonah, which is also implicit in many other books of the Old Testament – then Paul’s doctrines, which have become the very core of Christianity, lose their point and plausibility and come to look bizarre.<sup>121</sup>

Kaufmann draws a line from Paul’s extreme approach here to his embrace of the doctrine of predestination, at which point “...he gave up the idea of the equality and fraternity of all men.”<sup>122</sup> Because of Paul’s dramatic breaks from the ethos of the Old Testament, Kaufmann claims that there is in fact no such thing as a Judeo-Christian tradition, remarking that “...one might as well speak of the [sic] Judaeo-Islamic tradition or of the Greco-Christian tradition.”<sup>123</sup> So, while

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 220-221.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

Kaufmann certainly paints a picture of Paul as a man who stripped Christianity of its remaining Jewish influences and consequently of any possibility of the ethos of the Old Testament living on through it, he also makes clear that he was merely working with the material, or lack thereof, that was available to him.

Kaufmann next directs his attention to Martin Luther and the way in which the teachings of Jesus affected and were affected by him. His analysis begins with apparent Nietzschean influences once again in the form of a psychological profile:

Luther knew through the torture of his own experience how continence bred the half-crazed desire for incontinence, and virtue like a cancer could corrode the soul with the obsession to do evil. There is a peace of mind born of transgression which is sweeter than that of good conscience: the peace that attends virtue is a guarded joy, dependent on past triumphs and continued perseverance; *relative* to these, not absolute – not extraordinary, extreme, exalted. But still finding oneself in and after evil, knowing all the joy of sin and feeling that sin is not the great power virtue thinks it, not the menace against which we must at all times be on our guard, but a foe to whom one can concede a battle and survive – this sense of peace which comes of saturation and the new experience of a deadness to desire is indeed a peace surpassing unreflective understanding. Hence, not only must salvation through works be abandoned but a place must be found for sin. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that for Luther the Gospel, the glad tidings, was that one could sin and yet be saved, and that sin need not even be rationed.<sup>124</sup>

Clearly, Kaufmann finds Luther to be a truly fascinating figure, and he shows a remarkable amount of empathy and insight in his description of the state of mind of a man with whom he ultimately disagrees quite severely. According to Kaufmann, Luther's theological insights are born of deep psychological needs that are hardly peculiar to himself, yet once again, as in the case of Paul, just because a plausible explanation can be provided for how the ideas were arrived at does not mean that the ideas themselves are good. In this case, the flaws in the ideas come from a misunderstanding on Luther's part as to what he believed he was defining himself against. Luther came upon the idea of justification by faith alone because he believed that it was

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 230.

impossible to fulfill the ethical teachings that Jesus preached, leading him to famously tear out the Epistle of James which states “faith without works is dead” from his Bible, calling it an “epistle of straw.” But as Kaufmann points out, Luther was in fact arguing against a straw man, because neither Judaism nor Catholicism preached a doctrine of salvation by works alone:

The Old Testament was, for the most part, not at all concerned with individual salvation in another world or life; and the Pharisees who did believe in immortality never failed to supplement their teaching of the Law with the prophetic doctrine of repentance and forgiveness. They did *not* believe that salvation required unexceptional fulfillment of all laws, moral and ceremonial, or that they, and only they, could point to perfect records and hence were entitled to salvation while the rest of mankind was less fortunate. Nor did the Catholic church, prior to Luther, teach that only the perfect ascetic could win redemption while the rest of mankind would be damned. *Paul and Luther passionately, but erroneously, projected their own frantic efforts on two great religions within which they had failed to realize their self-imposed conception of salvation.*<sup>125</sup> [my emphasis]

As Kaufmann has already established, Luther was quite correct to be baffled by the ethical teachings of Jesus because, in fact, there was nothing tangible there to follow. But like Paul, he drew an unfortunate and harmful conclusion from this, that because faith is all that matters, ethics means nothing at all. Kaufmann wants to show that this “all or nothing” approach appears all the more untenable in light of the more reasonable and workable ethical perspectives he has outlined from the Old Testament, and that the case of Luther is but one more instance of a general pattern in the history of Christianity: “...the ever renewed effort to get around these sayings [of Jesus] without repudiating Jesus.”<sup>126</sup>

Kaufmann then turns to one final case of a prominent Christian thinker who failed to make sense of the teachings of Jesus and yet somehow remained a Christian anyway, Albert Schweitzer. Kaufmann describes Schweitzer as someone who “...is to many minds the one true Christian of our time – the one outstanding personality whose scholarly and thorough study of

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 230-231

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 231.

the Gospels led him to realize their ethic in his life. This view depends on ignorance of Schweitzer's writings."<sup>127</sup> Schweitzer began his career as a New Testament scholar and then at a certain point decided to become a doctor and tend to the needs to the underprivileged peoples of Africa, and what is striking to Kaufmann is that these two careers in fact have *nothing* to do with each other if one pays attention to the results of his New Testament research, unless the medical work could be considered an explicit repudiation of what he found. What is primary in Schweitzer's interpretation of Jesus is the eschatological nature of his message, that this world is ending and another is coming. Consequently, whatever ethical teachings Jesus may have emphasized were a mere interim ethic, a guide to behavior only until the next world appears, and this was the same basic approach to ethics that Paul adopted as well and was the paradigm of early Christianity. Unfortunately, both of them were wrong in their prediction, which had a profound effect upon the subsequent moral development of Christianity. As Schweitzer explains:

Both by their [the early Christians'] denial of the world and by their belief that the Kingdom comes of itself, they are condemned to refrain from all efforts to improve the present situation.

While Christianity has to tread this path, it cannot be to the surrounding Graeco-Roman world what it ought to be. It cannot use its moral energy as power for regenerating the empire and its peoples. It conquers paganism; it becomes the religion of the state. But owing to its peculiar character it must leave the state to its fate. This world is not the dough in which its leaven can work.<sup>128</sup>

Schweitzer's interpretation agrees with the basic points that Kaufmann has made so far about how the ethic of the New Testament is completely discontinuous with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament that emphasizes social justice and the here and now. Kaufmann has now found a prominent New Testament scholar to support his argument, and he presses home the stark implications: "Judged by his [Schweitzer's] moral standards, which are shared by millions

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>128</sup> Albert Schweitzer, "The Conception of the Kingdom of God in the Transformation of Eschatology" in *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 409.

who do not care to press the point, Christianity did not do what it ought to have done; and Schweitzer has the rare honesty to insist that *Christianity failed morally not because Christians have not been Christian enough, but because of the very nature of Christianity.*<sup>129</sup> Kaufmann commends Schweitzer for his “rare honesty” up to this point, but then goes on to show that he also unfortunately goes astray like many other theologians before and after him in his attempt to show that the original idea of Jesus’ Kingdom of God has been reinterpreted in the modern age as something spiritual rather than literal, which thus saves Christianity from the dustbin of history. As Schweitzer explains:

Only as it comes to be understood as something ethical and spiritual, rather than supernatural, as something to be realized rather than expected, can the Kingdom of God regain, in our faith, the force that it had for Jesus and the early Church. Christianity must have a firm hold of this, if it is to remain true to itself, as it was at the beginning, - religion dominated by the idea of the Kingdom of God. What the Kingdom of God is in reality is shown by the part which it plays in the life of faith. The precise conception which is held of its coming is a matter of secondary consideration.<sup>130</sup>

Kaufmann responds to this, fixating especially upon the last sentence:

Here we are close to the ancient *credo quia absurdum*. Jesus’ otherworldly kingdom is rejected in favor of an affirmation of *this* world; his disparagement of social problems is considered most unfortunate and countered with an ethic of social regeneration – and then we are assured that this apparently diametrical opposition “is only of secondary significance” because the new ideal can borrow the ancient name: “kingdom of God.” This phrase, of course, reflects not an artful attempt to deceive, but the believer’s sincere, if entirely subjective, sense of continuity.<sup>131</sup>

Schweitzer represents an especially interesting case for Kaufmann, someone who clearly had high standards of honesty up to a point, and who had the kind of ethical sense that Kaufmann associates with the Old Testament. Unfortunately, Schweitzer was unable to find this same kind of ethos in the New Testament, so he had to bend over backwards, exegetically speaking, to make the actual teachings of Jesus fit with his own sense of what the Christian message should

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<sup>129</sup> *Heretic*, 237.

<sup>130</sup> Schweitzer, 420-421.

<sup>131</sup> *Heretic*, 240.

be. So according to Kaufmann, however admirable Schweitzer's medical work may have been, as a theologian he committed the same basic error as Luther in making the "...claim that their own convictions are, even if not historically or empirically, in some higher sense the essence of the Gospel."<sup>132</sup>

At this point it would seem that we have arrived at Kaufmann as he is at his most heretical heights. Indeed, there is much in his account of the teachings of Jesus and the subsequent development of the Christian religion that will no doubt be shocking and objectionable to many people, maybe even more so than the most incendiary passages from Nietzsche, and it is not my intention to suggest that Kaufmann's perspective constitutes anything close to a last word on these issues. But at the same time, it is also difficult to deny that there is a real power behind Kaufmann's critique, owing to the fact that he brings together certain pieces of information and demonstrates that they do not fit together in the way that many people think they do. For Kaufmann, the truths that are the most taken for granted are the ones that may not actually be "truths" at all, and therefore need to be reexamined. There is a stark simplicity to this approach, simple without being simplistic. As Corngold observes, "Kaufmann's way of practicing heresy is to ask untoward questions[.]"<sup>133</sup> This practice is once again an outgrowth of the mission stated at the outset of the book, the quest for honesty. After his critique of Christianity, Kaufmann doubles down on this quest and reiterates how it is fundamentally at odds with certain ingrained tendencies within this tradition:

I refuse to make amends for honesty. It is pretty well known by now that scholarship may lead one to attribute to Jesus views that are not in favor today; and such honesty is forgiven, no less, if only it is coupled immediately with the protestation that facts, if inconvenient, are irrelevant, and that in a higher sense, whatever that may mean, all that

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>133</sup> Corngold, 171.



was good and true and beautiful was really taught by Jesus. In such contexts, “really” means “not *really*, but *you* know.”<sup>134</sup>

Kaufmann has no patience for this kind of double-speak, and if in the process of calling it out he upsets some people he otherwise considers to be perfectly respectable and well-intentioned, so be it. However, while much of his work is devoted to these kinds of sustained critiques, there are positive and constructive elements to his philosophy as well, and it to these that we shall now turn.

### Kaufmann’s Heretical Ethic

As we have already seen, Kaufmann’s analysis of the Old and New Testaments is primarily focused upon extracting the essential ethical content from them. While he considers the Old Testament morality far superior, he does not explicitly ally himself with Judaism as a religion. But Kaufmann does frequently express moral indignation to various degrees in his analyses of these religions, which raises the question of where Kaufmann himself stands. He answers this by outlining his own heretical yet humanistic morality, which he introduces by saying, “My own ethic is not absolute but a morality of openness. It is not a morality of rules but an ethic of virtues. It offers no security but goals.”<sup>135</sup> Kaufmann offers four cardinal virtues as a guide to his vision of a good life – humbition, love, courage, and honesty.

The first virtue of humbition, a combination of humility and ambition, may strike many as an unfortunate coinage, and perhaps of a piece with Kaufmann’s instinct to replace Sartre’s “bad faith” with “self-deception” in the existentialism anthology. But Kaufmann does make a compelling argument for this virtue with no exact name: “What I praise is not the meekness that

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<sup>134</sup> *Heretic*, 247.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

squats in the dust, content to be lowly, eager not to stand out, but humility winged by ambition. There is no teacher of humility like great ambition.”<sup>136</sup> Not surprisingly, Kaufmann couches his explication of this virtue in direct opposition to the ethic of the New Testament, especially Jesus’ famous saying in Matthew 7:1, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”<sup>137</sup> As Kaufmann explains:

Few things are more difficult than seeing some of one’s own faults. Ours usually look quite different from the faults of others – not really like faults at all. When we realize this, meekness says: Judge not, that you be not judged! And under his breath the devil adds: That way the lot of you will go to hell. But humbition says: I can see the back of your head and the black of your soul, but not my own, and you can see what escapes me; by being frank, we can help each other. No, the devil interposes; you will hurt each other’s feelings; be polite; be meek! But humbition replies: Judge, that you may be judged.<sup>138</sup>

He then elaborates further upon the problematic nature of meekness: “Soon ‘judge not’ becomes the counsel of timidity. Who, after all, am I to judge? If I forgive him, he may forgive me. If I am not severe with them, they may not be severe with me; and if others are not severe with me, why should I be severe with myself? We are all small people; let us stay that way. But I say: such meekness is no virtue.”<sup>139</sup> Such a description once again carries unmistakable Nietzschean echoes, especially relating to Nietzsche’s description of the *letzte Mensch* (last man), the lesser-known antipode to his ideal of the *Übermensch* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small.”<sup>140</sup> So Kaufmann’s humbition is meant as a corrective to the kind of mediocrity that he believes would inevitably

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>137</sup> NRSV.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>140</sup> *Portable Nietzsche*, 129.

result from universal meekness, but it also implicitly recognizes that ambition in and of itself can lead to dangerous consequences without a tempering agent.

Kaufmann is more elliptical in his explication of the virtue of love. He still resists common Christian notions, instead quoting from Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* that the "love of men" is "to sense their wants and bear their grief."<sup>141</sup> What Kaufmann wants to emphasize in his explanation, and what he thinks has not been sufficiently emphasized elsewhere, is the deeply empathetic element of love, something that most of the great writers of literature have recognized but that still eludes many others:

The paradox of love is not that love should be commanded but that there is a sense in which it is hardest to love those whom we love most. To command people to put themselves into their fellows' places, thinking about the thoughts, feelings, and interests of others, makes excellent sense. What few men have ever consciously realized is that highly intelligent people are frequently least capable of achieving such love in relation to those closest to them – those whom they, they themselves would say, love most.<sup>142</sup>

It is difficult to see what exactly Kaufmann is getting at here aside from the observation that intellect oftentimes gets in the way of deep emotional feeling. But beyond the element of empathy involved, he also stresses that the love he is speaking of "...involves the willingness to assume responsibility and to sacrifice."<sup>143</sup> Aware that this kind of language brings his notion closer to the traditional Christian virtue of love, he explicitly pushes back on this by referring to Paul's famous observation of love from his first letter to the Corinthians, "It [love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."<sup>144</sup> Kaufmann differentiates his virtue by responding, "The love I mean does not believe all things and hope all things. It survives disillusionment and persists in despair. Love is not love that ceases without hope or faith. As

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<sup>141</sup> *Heretic*, 307.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>144</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:7, NRSV.

long as faith and hope support it, it is hardly more than puppy love. That love is pleasant is a fashionable myth, or, to be more charitable about it, the exception.”<sup>145</sup> In this description, Kaufmann sometimes falls into his bad habit of asserting claims rather than arguing for them, particularly the claim about love combined with hope and faith as being akin to puppy love. But it is at least clear that he is continuing to explicitly repudiate the Christian virtues and providing what he sees as a corrective for them in the outlining of his own ethic.

Kaufmann has less to say about courage specifically but makes it clear that it is a necessary condition for one to exercise any kind of virtue at all. In an Aristotelian spirit, Kaufmann remarks, “Courage is vitality knowing the risks it runs.”<sup>146</sup> In other words, it is a necessary element in the energy of life, but it is not just the impulse to do brave things. Rather, it is a virtue that makes great actions possible while also being well aware that one may be putting oneself in harm’s way in the process. Kaufmann expands on this virtue by making reference to some literary exemplars:

Courage may participate in deeds that we do not admire; but even then the courage evokes admiration. Without courage, Odysseus would be sly, mean, and contemptible; because he has courage, he is one of mankind’s most widely admired heroes to whom generations have looked up. Without courage, Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello would all lose what claims they have on our sympathies; it is courage that makes them heroes. There is no tragic hero without courage: every tragic poet demands sympathy and admiration for his hero by endowing him with exceptional courage. Even when allied with causes we detest, courage speaks to us, the voice of conscience, calling us from sloth and resignation, a reproach and an appeal.<sup>147</sup>

This description shows that Kaufmann’s virtues are even more intertwined than he has explicitly spelled out so far. Not only is courage necessary for the other virtues, but clearly the empathetic love that Kaufmann has described is necessary for the appreciation of courage that he speaks of

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<sup>145</sup> *Heretic*, 309-310.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

here. In addition, this passage presages Kaufmann's tragic worldview, a more explicitly secular perspective that he will set up in conjunction with his ethic as an alternative to the Christian worldview.

The fourth virtue is honesty, which Kaufmann has already described in some detail elsewhere in the book, but as with courage, it is a necessary component for the other three virtues to exist and prefigures them. Kaufmann once again stresses the importance of this apparently straightforward yet elusive quality: "A little honesty is so easy, so common, so unavoidable, it is hardly a virtue. But thorough honesty is the rarest and most difficult of all the virtues; and without that, each of the other three is somewhat deficient."<sup>148</sup> Kaufmann once again becomes polemical in his account of honesty by extensively describing what it is not, and even defends this exercise by saying, "Whoever praises honesty will not be understood unless he explains what he means by dishonesty. Affirmations that imply no denials are meaningless."<sup>149</sup> Given that claim, here are some brief characterizations of dishonesty that Kaufmann offers:

Dishonesty says: My views are what I mean; yours are what you said.

Dishonesty says: You are doing all you can. You are better than your achievements and you conduct. You never had a chance. There is no use trying because all the cards are stacked against you. You lack the ability to make much of yourself. You are going to do great things, but not yet. You are never dishonest.<sup>150</sup>

In this discussion Kaufmann ends with the claim, "Dishonesty approximates the mythical ubiquity of original sin."<sup>151</sup> Such a sentence seems representative of Kaufmann's flair for the melodramatic, but upon closer examination it is apparent that Kaufmann is in fact trying to be systematic in his process of setting up an alternative to the Christian perspective. He uses the

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 311-312.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 312.

vocabulary of that tradition only as a means of more effectively driving home what the moral stakes really are as far as he is concerned.

Many philosophers who have promoted an explicitly secular or humanistic ethics have tried to prove the correctness of their values in some way, but Kaufmann is at least enough of a Nietzschean to know that it would be useless to make any such attempts in that direction:

An ethic cannot be proved; to be held responsibly, it has to be based on encounter upon encounter. This notion of encounter is of the utmost philosophic importance. It makes possible safe passage between the untenable claim of proof and the unwarranted charge of irrationality. A position may be rational though it cannot be deduced from universally accepted premises, and a man may be rational without claiming that his views, his ethic, or his faith are susceptible of such proof.<sup>152</sup>

In his discussion of this point Kaufmann makes reference to Jean-Paul Sartre, whose existentialist ethics also emphasizes the specific nature of each situation rather than some kind of “one size fits all” maxim, but there is an even closer connection to the ethics of ambiguity articulated by Simone de Beauvoir:

What must be done, practically? Which action is good? Which is bad? To ask such a question is to fall into a naïve abstraction. We don't ask the physicist “Which hypotheses are true?” Nor the artist, “By what procedures does one produce a work whose beauty is guaranteed?” Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods.<sup>153</sup>

Kaufmann proposes his own methods here, beginning with one that he sees as all too common within the practice of his profession generally, which is “...to begin by proposing one's own ‘philosophy’ and then to judge other views from there, externally. In that case, other views are rarely taken seriously; one generally has not really exposed oneself to them; there have been no genuine encounters.”<sup>154</sup> Kaufmann then contrasts this with his understanding of his own method:

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>153</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), 134.

<sup>154</sup> *Heretic*, 320.

I wrote a book on Nietzsche after finding previous interpretations inadequate: as they did not do justice to the evidence, I tried to do better. In religion and morality, similarly, I did not begin with my own outlook and then repudiate whatever conflicted with it. I began by accepting old ideas, found difficulties, then developed some criticisms – and eventually asked myself: What, then, can I believe?<sup>155</sup>

Such reflections are probably bound to come off as self-serving to those who do not agree with Kaufmann, but he is trying to explain why so much of his philosophical output is devoted to criticism of other views. He is not merely trying to be negative. On the contrary, the formation of his own views requires this kind of approach, which is perhaps one of the few ways in which Kaufmann is not merely a Nietzschean but a Hegelian as well.

### Kaufmann's Tragic Worldview

In addition to his ethic with specifically heretical virtues, Kaufmann tries to articulate a worldview created out of the literature of tragedy which is meant to provide a genuine and irreconcilable alternative to the Christian worldview. We have already seen him gesture in this direction in his critique of William James in the *Critique*, in which he remarks that "...where success is esteemed higher than integrity, there can be no understanding of tragedy."<sup>156</sup> In *Heretic*, Kaufmann's explication is inspired by consideration of another figure who stands at the border of psychology and philosophy, Sigmund Freud, and it is evident that Kaufmann has a much higher regard for him than for James, saying, "Like no man before him, he lent substance to the notion that all men are brothers. Criminals and madmen are not devils in disguise but men and women who have problems similar to our own, and there, but for one experience or another, go you and I."<sup>157</sup> For Kaufmann, this kind of perspective exemplifies his own heretical virtue of love, which he sees as going far beyond the Christian conception. To see how many of the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> *Critique*, 117.

<sup>157</sup> *Heretic*, 331.

themes considered so far tie into Kaufmann's outlook, it will be necessary to outline the main components of it that he offers.

Kaufmann begins by describing the tragic worldview as one that recognizes that "...failure is compatible with greatness."<sup>158</sup> This is consistent with many of the criticisms that he makes in his consideration of James and is a manifestation of certain frustrations that Kaufmann has not merely with Christianity but also with the ethos of his adopted country, specifically the success-mindset of 1950's America. The second major point that Kaufmann wishes to emphasize regarding the tragic perspective is that "...while the meaning of greatness can be spelled out in terms of virtues, greatness – indeed, the universe – remains mysterious."<sup>159</sup> Kaufmann's fixation upon this specific aspect is related to a passage in which Freud discusses the tragedies of Shakespeare in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

Just as all neurotic symptoms, like dreams themselves, are capable of hyper-interpretation, and even require such hyper-interpretation before they become perfectly intelligible, so every genuine poetical creation must have proceeded from more than one motive, more than one impulse in the mind of the poet, and must admit of more than one interpretation. I have here attempted to interpret only the deepest stratum of impulses in the mind of the creative poet.<sup>160</sup>

Kaufmann's gloss on this passage is, "Where psychological explanations are attempted, belief in greatness is diminished and may even evaporate unless one insists, as Freud did, that no one interpretation is adequate, and that no conjunction of interpretations is exhaustive."<sup>161</sup> This is an instance of Kaufmann's celebration of the *good* kind of ambiguity, one that can never be exhausted and that can therefore never be artificially formulated into a dogma. As in his

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>160</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Dr. A.A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 278-279.

<sup>161</sup> *Heretic*, 347.



discussion of Job, Kaufmann embraces a perspective that confronts the difficult realities of human existence and refuses to explain them away.

Kaufmann makes this even more explicit when he states, “A tragic worldview is incompatible with the belief that human failure is merely an episode, compensated by subsequent rewards. Failure must be final. The end must be tragic.”<sup>162</sup> Contained within this description is an implicit denial of the Christian worldview. Even though Christianity has as its central image the sufferings of Christ, such a story has a happy ending when he comes back and ascends into heaven. Kaufmann is trying to get us to view this ending in the same way that many people view the unsatisfying, tacked-on ending of the book of Job. There is no real difference for him because it rings false. It is not consistent with human experience in this world. Indeed, Kaufmann goes even further when he says that the tragic perspective means that “...failure must be inevitable.”<sup>163</sup> What he is gesturing at here is the notion that the true tragic hero is the one who knowingly chooses failure, and the Christ narrative only goes halfway in this trajectory:

If we changed the Christian view and imagined a man who deliberately chose damnation either to comfort the damned or, if that should prove impossible, at least to retain his integrity – because he would rather be in hell than near God in heaven, watching the torments of the damned – such a man might well be considered a tragic hero. But that is precisely because he would be greater than most who succeed, because he would deserve respect and admiration, and because in this context failure *would* be inevitable. (...) He would rather be honest with his God and go to hell than be a hypocrite and go to heaven.<sup>164</sup>

That last sentence should hardly be surprising given Kaufmann’s regard for the virtue of honesty so far, but this description can be understood as the virtue being taken to the utmost extreme. The truly virtuous heretic is the one who will remain honest even in the face of the eternal reward of

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 351.

heaven that Christianity offers. Kaufmann is setting up a high standard for virtue, and he is well aware that such a view will be unpalatable to most, observing that "...those who demand works will always make fewer converts than those who stress faith and the remission of sins."<sup>165</sup> But he is not trying to convert anyone. Rather, he is issuing a challenge to the reader in the same spirit as the challenge which he feels from reading the Hebrew Bible as opposed to the New Testament.

### Critical Appraisal of The Faith of a Heretic

While there is not nearly as much critical discussion of Kaufmann's views in *Heretic* as there is of his work on Nietzsche, there is still some, and it is not surprising that a lot of it is quite negative, especially coming from those who identify as Christians. R.B.Y. Scott, a minister and renowned scholar of the Old Testament who was a colleague of Kaufmann's at Princeton, engaged in a "Guerre de Plume" with him in one journal, and took issue with Kaufmann's claim that Christian theology is guilty of gerrymandering. Scott claims that Kaufmann is just as guilty of this as the people he accuses, and gives a particular instance of Kaufmann's own practice of misrepresentation:

He quotes only what appears to support his contentions, and then often most unfairly. An example is the tirade (pages 220-24) against the Sermon on the Mount's idea of reward for ethical obedience. Quite apart from the fact that blessing and curse are the sanctions also of the Deuteronomic law, and that doom or deliverance depending on behavior is the constant theme of the Old Testament prophets, it is simply not so that "in the Gospels, one is taught to lose oneself only to find *oneself*...we are taught to give up what is of no account. In what truly matters, we are expected to see to our own interest." If ever the plain meaning of a great saying was perverted by underlining the wrong word, this is such a case, and the perversion is willful.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>166</sup> R.B.Y. Scott and Walter Kaufmann, "Princetonian Guerre de Plume," *The Christian Century*, January 31, 1962.

While Scott accusing Kaufmann of himself gerrymandering is a mere *tu quoque*, the specific example he gives does give some added weight to his criticism. He is pointing out that the Old Testament actually emphasizes reward for good behavior and punishment for bad just as the New Testament does. However, in his response Kaufmann argues that he does in fact acknowledge this to a certain extent, as in passages like, “Moses and the prophets had also often referred to the future, though categorical demands were more characteristic of their style and pathos. But the future they envisaged was a social future; for Micah and Isaiah it even involved the whole of humanity. The Jesus of the Gospels appeals to each man’s self-interest.”<sup>167</sup> He also attempts to make a distinction between the two when he observes, “The prophets do not *predict* disaster; they threaten disasters that are bound to happen if the people persist in their ways, but the hope is always that they will not persist in their ways and thus avoid the disaster.”<sup>168</sup> In both of these passages, it is clear that Kaufmann sometimes argues that the distinction between the ethic of the Old and New Testament is not so much that only one emphasizes reward and punishment, but rather that one is a communal ethic, in which all of the people are held to be responsible, and the other is an individual ethic. So understood, Kaufmann’s leap from this to the claim that the ethic of the New Testament is self-serving does not necessarily follow from those assertions. Kaufmann unfortunately does not directly answer the charge of making a willful perversion of Jesus’ words other than to simply claim that he has made an extensive case for that throughout the book. Scott therefore shows that Kaufmann is not always at his best when it comes to arguments based on the close interpretation of scripture, and his overall assessment is representative of many Christian critics of Kaufmann in its fundamental ambivalence: “Let it be

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<sup>167</sup> *Heretic*, 211.

<sup>168</sup> *Heretic*, 224.

admitted that there is uncomfortable truth in some of his strictures. But his wholesale and rhetorical condemnation of theologians in general is preposterous.”<sup>169</sup>

Other reviewers of the book give less ambivalent responses. Consider the following:

[T]he reader, if he is to go along with Kaufmann, must proceed without “prejudice.” This confronts the Christian reader with a problem. In Tolstoy’s words, he can no more return to the perspective of the unregenerate man than “a flying bird can reenter the egg shell from which it has emerged.” But unless he performs this impossible feat, Kaufmann will insist that the Christian loves Christianity more than truth. Thus, from Kaufmann’s point of view, every Christian is *eo ipso* dishonest.<sup>170</sup>

According to this reviewer, Kaufmann stacks the deck against Christianity before he begins, and for this reason he cannot possibly engage in anything resembling a fair or civil dialogue with a Christian interlocutor. Another reviewer makes much the same point, but goes even further:

Kaufmann admits that there cannot be any reasonable discussion and joint inquiry, unless the basic honesty of all the participants is recognized. But the overwhelmingly negative drift of his arguments has as its practical effect, whatever his intention, the generation of a conviction that Jewish and Christian believers are not honest in any actual ways of defending their beliefs. Given Kaufmann’s picture of theological minds at work, there is no way of associating such believers in any common quest of honesty. This comes dangerously close to limiting the honest men in religious discussions to those accepting Kaufmann’s working definition of faith.<sup>171</sup>

What this reviewer is saying is that in Kaufmann’s initial description of his quest for honesty, it would appear that he has defined his terms in such a way as to have already labeled those who disagree with him as dishonest. After having examined both the substance of Kaufmann’s argument and the rhetoric that he employs to put it forward, it is difficult to argue with these critiques, at least to a certain extent. While Kaufmann almost always argues for his central claims in a careful way, he does have a tendency to overshoot the mark at times and make his claims in a hyperbolic style strangely devoid of irony. Even one of Kaufmann’s admirers

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<sup>169</sup> “Princetonian Guerre de Plume,” 130.

<sup>170</sup> James D. Preus, “Review,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (May 1962), 311.

<sup>171</sup> James Collins, “Review,” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (Sept 1962), 499.

expresses this dichotomy when he observes, “Brilliant and extremely well-read, Kaufmann, it must be said, as a polemicist could at times be unfair and ungenerous and occasionally downright nasty.”<sup>172</sup>

However, if Kaufmann does sometimes go too far, it is perhaps because he sees himself, like Nietzsche, as one who is and will always remain outside of the traditional academic establishment. All of Kaufmann’s works, but especially the ones considered in this study, are strange hybrids – works that certainly contain much impressive scholarship, and yet are striving to go beyond just that. As Corngold remarks, “Clearly, *The Faith of a Heretic* is more than the work of a reclusive theorist or a philosophical dilettante: it answers to a personal compulsion, and it is only in this respect a personal memoir.”<sup>173</sup> Kaufmann is doing more than writing an academic study about how the ethic of Judaism is superior to the ethic of Christianity. He wants to make a personal statement about his values, and the critique of the relative values of existing religions could be understood as the mere occasion for him to do so. Furthermore, Kaufmann’s status as one apart from traditional academia may have in fact given him a rare opportunity to do what many others shy away from, as Pickus observes:

In academic writing on religion it is often taken for granted that, since religious polemics are pointless, i.e., do not produce agreement (and make people angry), they should be avoided altogether. While this is undoubtedly true in some respects, many more writers than Kaufmann have noted that refraining from confrontation leads more often to mollification and “avoidance,” in the bad sense of the term. Precisely because Kaufmann was such an outsider, he could not only plead for more contestation in the comparative study of religion, he could out and out do it.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> James Woelfel, “The Faith of a Heretic: Walter Kaufmann,” in *The Existentialist Legacy and Other Essays on Philosophy and Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006),

<sup>173</sup> Corngold, 170.

<sup>174</sup> David Pickus, “Jewish Nietzscheanism: Kaufmann’s Critique of Christianity,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, Issue 1 (2007), 92.

As unpleasant as some of Kaufmann's points undoubtedly are to those who are his targets, there still may nevertheless be some real value in his account by simply getting the issues clarified. Once that happens, perhaps a more honest debate can happen that will be more beneficial to both sides once they have a clear sense of where they stand in relation to one another and what they really disagree about.

## Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to outline as clearly as I can a certain trajectory in the first phase of Walter Kaufmann's career, in which he began as an expositor of other philosophers and philosophical movements, developed his own views in a piecemeal fashion in an early semi-aphoristic work, and then finally consolidated them into a coherent position which he himself proudly labeled as "heretical." Throughout I have tried to critically engage with Kaufmann's position as much as possible without impeding the clear description of it, but I will now speak more directly about my assessment of the overall value of Kaufmann's philosophy of religion.

Whether he likes it or not, Kaufmann bears the unmistakable stamp of Nietzschean influence throughout his philosophy. Sometimes it is in terms of content, as in his relentless critique of Christianity as a religion, and sometimes it is in terms of tone or style, as in his highly vitriolic polemics. This can be most clearly seen in his critique of theology. Like Nietzsche, Kaufmann sometimes goes too far in making his points. In his condemnation of an entire field, he surely cannot be completely right. Yet, he is capable of making compelling arguments and at least seems to give as much benefit of the doubt to the opposing side as he can. Theologians can probably benefit from considering some of the uncomfortable questions he asks. How can one reconcile a religion that claims to define itself in terms of specific creedal beliefs with the multiplicity of interpretations to which these formulations are susceptible? To what extent are strategies like Tillich's theory of symbols or Bultmann's demythologization mere evasions of this problem?

Although much of Kaufmann's writings are devoted to these kinds of extended critiques, I believe that he is at his best when he is doing the exact opposite – when he is trying to celebrate

something that he believes has been heretofore misunderstood. His work on Nietzsche is certainly the most well-known instance of this, but it is also the motivation behind his work on the Old Testament. Kaufmann challenges us to see beyond the common caricature of the harsh “eye for an eye” morality of the vengeful Yahweh to discover a humanistic ethic that recognizes the unique value of human life in all of its complexity. His interpretation of the book of Job in particular is a powerful statement on the uselessness of tidy philosophical explanations in the face of the existential reality of human suffering and is one of the best illustrations of Kaufmann’s especially high standards of honesty. By getting us to see the world of the Old Testament anew, he implicitly asks us to question many other preconceived notions we may have as well.

While his critique of Christianity may have its flaws, it at least brings up the interesting question of how the notion of an afterlife might affect and even undermine morality. This is where Kaufmann both shows a Kantian influence but may even out-Kant Kant, claiming that living a moral life on this world with no hope of future reward is inherently more virtuous. This idea was explored in the recent television show *The Good Place*. In this show, it is posited that the way in which you get into the “Good Place” (Heaven) is by accumulating as many points as you can in the form of good deeds. At one point, some characters on earth are told about this whole system, which results in their no longer being able to earn any more points because their motives would always be tainted. This is an interesting, if tongue-in-cheek, application of the main point that Kaufmann is making. The promise of an afterlife certainly makes it easier for a religion to gain converts, but this is fundamentally against Kaufmann’s overarching quest for honesty. The idea of a good deed being its own reward may only be compelling to a very small



segment of the population, but this in itself is certainly no reason to reject it as an ideal to strive towards.

Finally, there is the issue of Kaufmann's own ethic and worldview. Unfortunately, Kaufmann is at his weakest when he is being purely constructive in his philosophy, with no intellectual foil to react against. However, the virtues that he delineates – humbition, love, courage, and honesty – though undeveloped, are probably good ones, and if we are looking for the primary exemplar of them we need look no further than Kaufmann himself, whose approach to philosophy clearly implies that a philosopher should practice what he preaches. And his tragic worldview, which embraces the idea that death and failure are inevitable, is once again a difficult pill for many to swallow, but it is also the logical extreme of his ethic of honesty. This worldview coupled with these virtues constitute Kaufmann's most definitive and substantive contribution to the field of the philosophy of religion, which is to continue the project of value-creation initiated by Nietzsche. He demonstrates that such an endeavor need not be a gloomy, nihilistic affair, but rather can be a way of offering a valuable corrective to certain historical shortcomings in religious ethics. Anyone can criticize a religious tradition for being hypocritical or internally inconsistent, and Kaufmann certainly does this, but once these points have been delineated, the real work begins of coming up with what should replace it. There are few philosophers bold enough to believe that they can improve upon the Christian ethical tradition, but Kaufmann is one of them, and he invites us to question what it truly means to be a person of strong moral character and, if necessary, redefine it in a way that defies centuries of accepted dogma.

I accept this invitation from Kaufmann, but this is where I shall leave him. I agree with many of the insightful and penetrating points in his critiques, but there is much work still to be

done regarding the further elaboration of constructive solutions. This aspect of Kaufmann's work is merely a signpost pointing towards a large, unexplored wilderness. The area indicated is certainly worth exploring, and if I choose to do so it will not be as a disciple of Kaufmann. I'm not sure if being a "Kaufmann-ian" is even possible. Much like being a Nietzschean, it seems a contradiction in terms. One can learn many lessons from Kaufmann, but the best way to honor his legacy is to go beyond him.

That being said, I leave this project with the same fundamental religious standpoint I had coming into it – an agnostic with vague allegiances to Christianity, specifically the Episcopal Church tradition I was raised in, and to Nichiren Buddhism, a tradition I found later on in life. I find Kaufmann's virtue of honesty to be a great help in clarifying what exactly this standpoint means. As an agnostic, I find the very concept of God to be endlessly baffling, such that I cannot say that I even know what it would mean for God to exist, much less what it would mean for me to say that I believe in Him/Her/It. This is an honest statement of my intellectual confusion. As a lapsed Episcopalian, I respect the specific tradition I was raised in as one which gave me some valuable spiritual and moral guidance early on in life, and which I remain positively disposed towards because of its emphasis upon reason as equal to scripture and tradition and because of its commitment to the rights of LGBTQ+ people. This is an honest statement of my loyalty. As a semi-lapsed Buddhist, I am grateful to know that there is a tradition which offers a concrete spiritual practice that can be used to make me a genuinely good and happy person, even if it is a practice which I am not always disciplined enough to benefit from. This is an honest statement of my brute pragmatism. All of these statements are honest, and therefore cannot be wrong. Within the field of philosophy, there is much discussion about the quest for truth, and that is certainly worth pursuing, but I find Kaufmann's paradigm of honesty to be far more helpful because it is

well within our reach if we are only willing to be introspective enough. Of course, this is not to say that true honesty, either with oneself or others, is easy. But this is the challenge that Kaufmann's philosophy issues to us. Whether or not this study has adequately met that challenge, I leave for the reader to decide.