



1981

Walter Kaufmann, Discovering the Mind: Goethe, Kant, and Hegel

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Recommended Citation

Bordeau, Edward J. (1981) "Walter Kaufmann, Discovering the Mind: Goethe, Kant, and Hegel," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol1/iss2/3>

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Walter Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind: Goethe, Kant, and Hegel*. New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1980. 288 pp. \$14. 95.

Review by Edward Bordeaux

Discovering the Mind is the first volume of a trilogy. Since Walter Kaufmann died in September of last year, the publication of the remaining two volumes is in question. Although some allusions are made to men and ideas to be treated in the subsequent volumes, this highly engaging inquiry into the different directions Goethe, Kant, and Hegel each travelled on the road to "discovering the mind" is executed with such clarity, singleness of purpose, and erudition as to be self-contained. In addition to Goethe, Kant, and Hegel, the projected trilogy was to include Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Buber (Volume II), and Freud, Adler, and Jung (Volume III).

Kaufmann does nothing to hide his feelings for the three German thinkers he is assessing; on the contrary, he is convinced that only by honestly confronting these emotions do we discover something about our own minds. Obscure writing reflects an author's fear of knowing something about himself and this in part explains both Kant's and Hegel's inability to express their philosophies clearly. In a style at once crisp and brusque, Kaufmann wastes no words to reveal his enormous dislike for Kant and to express his equally enormous admiration for Goethe, and in part for Hegel.

But honesty is only a part of the explanation for Kaufmann's aggressive style. He tells us he loves philosophy and would like to see the mainstream take a new direction. Contemporary philosophers in phenomenology, existentialism, and analytic philosophy continue to imitate the philosophical style of Kant, which Kaufmann considers a "disaster." His contribution to this redirection of philosophy is to help destroy the myth that Kant was a rigorous, scientific thinker and to demonstrate that not only has Kant contributed little or nothing to the discovery of the mind but has actually impeded such a discovery by developing a misguided transcendental method in preference to history and psychology.

Nonetheless, Kaufmann's feelings towards Kant are ambivalent.

On several occasions he refers to Kant as “one of the greatest philosophers of all time,” in the same league with Plato and Aristotle. But he fails to tell us why or how Kant earns this high esteem. At one point Kaufmann mentions Kant’s “comprehensive vision,” which, however, he has already labeled a “disaster.” He tells us that if he had to divide philosophers into the “good guys” and the “bad guys,” Kant would certainly be placed among the “good guys.” Why? It seems that despite the fact that Kant was unable to face it, he was a “daring” philosopher who helped to topple the rationalistic cosmology, theology, and psychology of his day. Kant’s great failure lay in his inability to offer his convictions as hypotheses, mere suggestions, or educated guesses; rather, he made a pretense of scientific rigor, completeness, and finality, and succeeded in convincing most of his readers, as well as himself, that he had actually done so.

Kaufmann accentuates Kant’s failures as a thinker by contrasting him with Goethe, who, according to him, made the greatest contributions to the discovery of the mind. He quotes Nietzsche, who identified Kant as “the antipode of Goethe” in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889). Whereas Kant was a conceptual thinker, at home with abstractions and words, Goethe was a “visual” thinker, steeped in life experience, and who expressed his thoughts with a charming lucidity.

The first and second sections of the book treat of Goethe’s and Kant’s contributions to the discovery of the mind, and their findings can be organized under four points. First, the question of human freedom and autonomy greatly interested both German thinkers, but their views are diametrically opposed. Wishing to stave off the determinism implied by a Newtonian world view, Kant held that we are free when our choices are determined, not by our inclinations or interests, but by our duty to obey moral laws because they are rational and hold for everyone. Kaufmann ironically interprets the Categorical Imperative to mean we are free only when we don’t have “a will of our own.” Goethe, on the other hand, takes “autonomy” to mean “independence,” an Emersonian independence that translates into self-reliance and nonconformity; in contradistinction to Kant, it means having “a will of your own.” Kaufmann regards Kantian ethics, as well as Kantian aesthetics, as reflections, not of the human

mind, but of Kant's peculiar mind with all its eccentricities.

Secondly, according to Kaufmann, Kant was woefully out of touch with the realities of human life and experience; his personal life was extremely parochial and uncommon. A cerebral man of uncompromising routine, Kant was comfortable with conceptions and words, ever given to making unhelpful coinages; he totally lacked an aesthetic sense. And he made the fatal mistake of making his mind the model of the human mind, of uncritically universalizing the peculiarities of his upbringing and environment. By contrast, Goethe was a deeply experiential man with great artistic sensitivity. He identified man with his deeds and actions; thus, he rejected the belief that man has a static essence or an inner self or soul having a timeless structure.

Thirdly, as Kaufmann interprets Kant, he believed that the human mind was a static entity, furnished with an unchanging set of categories and faculties, fixed for all time. But Goethe, as we have shown, was ever sensitive to the variant flux of becoming, to the dynamic, and understood the human mind as a process of development that could be grasped only in its movements.

Finally, even more important is Goethe's refusal to support the method of Newtonian science as the paradigm of knowledge as Kant and others had done. Prejudiced against hypotheses and probability, the Newtonian model of science continued the classical bias in favor of the certainty and necessity of mathematics. Kant looked upon the concepts of Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry as revelations of the immutable structure of the human mind itself.

In staking out within the mind of man this immutable terrain, Kant secured for man a remnant of the transcendent and thus saved him from being engulfed by the phenomenal. In Whitehead's words, Kant provided man with "a refuge from the goading urgency of contingent happenings." Not unlike Plato, Kant sought to escape from contingency and change, developing a philosophy of universal and necessary laws in science and morals. Even in his personal life chance was allowed no entry; his daily activities were strictly regulated by a scrupulously administered schedule that extended to the quantity of tobacco he could smoke and the number of pills he

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could take for his constipation.

But Kant's static view of man became increasingly uncongenial to an age of revolution and a period committed to progress. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a product of the Enlightenment and had been inspired, initially at least, by the "noble ideals" of the French Revolution. The last segment of the book deals with Hegel who, of course, inherited, as a legacy of the German Idealistic movement that was spawned by Kant's works, the idea of a philosophical science with the spurious rigor of mathematics. But Hegel had also been significantly influenced by Goethe, from whom he acquired the conviction that "the history of science is science itself." Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind* (1807) supports inconsistent interpretations of the meaning of "phenomenology." On the one hand, it embodies the Goethean program of trying to catch the meaning of the mind in its development, in the process of its own becoming. On the other hand, the work is presented as a preparation for raising consciousness to the level of absolute knowledge; we are allegedly led, by a logical progression, from stage to stage wherein the transitions are "necessary." But all of this is pretense of scientific rigor, in imitation of the founder of the tradition, Kant. According to Kaufmann, the movements are arbitrary or rather dictated by aesthetic preference. However, despite his Kantian method Hegel does advance the discovery of the mind by the centrality of the Goethean themes in the *Phenomenology*, themes that continued to operate even in those students of his thought who turned against him, such as Marx, Kierkegaard, and Dewey.

It seems to me that *Discovering the Mind* contributes to a redirection of philosophy already dramatically advanced by the American pragmatists of the last century, especially by Charles S. Peirce and William James. Peirce's emphasis on the "experimental method" and the tentative and fallible nature of both scientific and philosophical truth and James's redefinition of the mind as a "stream of consciousness" in his epoch making *Principles of Psychology* (1890) reflect the impact of Darwinism on post-Kantian philosophy, an impact from which Kantianism never recovered. The evolutionary hypothesis, as applied to science itself and to the nature of the mind, could not but make us view both as processes that can be understood

only in their respective movements or histories, a view expressed somewhat statically by Hegel. It was Goethe's genius to have already grasped this truth intuitively, even before Darwin gave it scientific respectability.

But it was, as Whitehead called him, that "adorable" James who first formalized the realization that at bottom philosophic sides are taken by aesthetic preferences; whether one is at home with novelty and experimentation, as was Goethe, or whether one is more comfortable with the fixed and immutable, as was Kant, is ultimately decided by temperament, according to James. Psychology has much to do with our philosophies and cannot be excluded from them without doing violence to our experience and our own self-understanding.

After World War II, Walter Kaufmann's reinterpretation of Hegel, together with the neo-Marxist movement, did much to stimulate a renewed interest in Hegel studies. The redirection of philosophy which he hoped to influence with his critique of Kant and others in his projected trilogy involves two major reconstructions: one in philosophical method and the other in a reformulation of the nature of the human mind.