

The Future of the Humanities

Walter Kaufmann. *The Future of the Humanities*. New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977. Pp. xi-xxi, 226. \$8.95.

The humanities have been thought of as the study of man as a unique and creative being. As such the legitimate concerns in the field have involved the intellectual and cultural dimensions of mankind as manifested in history, philosophy, religion, literature, and the arts. Since the Second World War, such college and university departments have faced declining enrollments and the threat of irrelevance. In *The Future of the Humanities*, Kaufmann provides both a vigorous interpretation of what has gone wrong and a prescription to remedy the situation. As he points out in the "Prologue," "Although much of what is done in the field is clearly trivial, it is widely felt that the humanities may hold the key to the future of humanity. But as they are now taught all too often they hold the key to their own coffin" (p. xvii). Thus, his aim is to concentrate on the goals of the humanities (which he identifies with reasons for teaching them) and to show how many of the elements of the field fit together and what might be done about them.

Kaufmann identifies four reasons for teaching the humanities: (1) to conserve and cultivate the greatest works of the human race; (2) to understand not only the goals of human existence set forth by the separate disciplines but also the alternatives to these goals; (3) to teach vision (a point which Kaufmann emphasizes as possible); and (4) to teach the critical spirit.

His opening chapter describes four kinds of mind: scholastic, visionary, Socratic, and journalistic. The scholastic mind (found commonly in colleges and universities) is placed as just slightly above the journalistic which falls into the biblical bottomless pit. Visionaries stand high on Kaufmann's list for they are the loners who do not cater to their colleagues by needing or wanting their agreement. Unlike the scholastics (the "creepers" or "climbers" who lack their own visions and must rely on the consensus of others to make their mark), the visionaries, e.g., Einstein, Spinoza, and Nietzsche spend their creative years spelling out their visions. The Socratic mind, concentrating on criticism, examines the faith and morals of its time. Seeing this group as swimming against the stream Kaufmann concludes that perhaps Socrates may be the only one who falls under this category because the others have not had their Platons.

His harshest criticism is directed at the journalistic minds who write for today, while caring neither for the past or future nor for scholarship. In addition, the journalists are the Sophists of the twentieth century for they claim to know what they do not know. Edmund Wilson and Hannah Arendt are assigned to this category — with Wilson coming in for particularly severe criticism.

It is in his discussion of the four kinds of mind that Professor Kaufmann especially explicates his prescription for the humanities. He insists upon the need for making such that the Socratic ethos which involves the search for alternatives by means of probing and questioning is not extinguished. This is to be achieved by returning to pre-World War II standards, that is, before higher education became "more professional, scholastic, and anti-Socratic" (p. 35), with students more interested in examinations and professors more concerned with publishing. It is here that Professor Kaufmann is in line with Andre Gide who said "To disturb is my function" for he tells us that the Socratic must be considered an alternative to the scholastic and journalistic types.

Since the classics are an integral part of the humanities, he devotes one chapter to them, explaining the four major approaches to reading books that are worth reading more than once.

"Exegetical" reading wherein the reader's attitude is "we don't know and he does," endows a book with authority and then allows the reader to put his own ideas into it. Often used by clerics and twentieth century secularists, this type is dangerous because it is self-deceptive and permits the reader to avoid culture shock.

"Dogmatic" reading based on the notion that "we know and he doesn't" allows the reader to become arrogant, implausible, condescending, and myopic.

The "agnostic" approach, which says "we don't know," makes reading microscopic and like stamp collecting. As Professor Kaufmann says about all three: "one reads without encountering a You and takes no chances of suffering culture shock" (p. 59).

"Dialectical reading fuses three elements: Socratic; dialogical; and historical-philosophical. Again the culture shock is important for reading must be allowed to challenge, shock, and offend us. In addition, the fourth kind exposes us to alternatives. Since the reading process is fundamental to the humanities, one needs to pay particular attention to the You, the writer's whole oeuvre, and the author's style of thought. "No reform of education, especially in the humanities, can hope to get far if it does not pay attention to the ways in which students are taught to read" (p. 82).

Chapter Three is the most unsatisfactory part of this study. His discussion of reviewers, translators, and editors, are marked by sharp, repetitious, and sometimes meaningless tirades. He also repeats part of his criticism of scholastics. He dismisses reviewers by saying that "most reviews should not be taken very seriously" (p. 87). While not denying the need for translations, he claims that the versions we too frequently see are counter-productive. Finally, he refers to most collections of articles as "timely things instead of timeless classics" (p. 103), the intellectual equivalent of "junk food." The central question in terms of all of these he says is "Why?" He concludes by saying: "Legions are living off dead writers instead of giving them of their own blood to make them speak" (p. 124).

One of the most explicit chapters deals with religion and involves a clear outline of how a humanities teacher might offer a one term course in comparative religion and how he might offer a careful examination in another course of the first book of the Old Testament, "Genesis," the one which Professor Kaufmann calls the most beautiful, profound, and influential book of Western Civilization. The presentation of such courses would not only set forth purposes and aims that are a necessary part of any humanities program but also allow for a cultural shock. It would transcend departmental boundaries and open the doors to the interdisciplinary approach which he will emphasize in his final chapter.

In Chapter Five Professor Kaufmann takes up the fight for setting forth both goals and discipline in education. He ties all of this in with the four goals of the humanities discussed earlier.

Kaufmann argues that higher education has moved from a teacup era in which educators were merely concerned with educating those who were to take over the family business and major social and political positions to the period of specialization where educators have shut their eyes to the future and to the goals of education. Education lacks the vision to counteract the scholastic's hyper-specialization which has caused blindness. "Vision can be taught to some extent, but not by those who are afraid of discipline, or of thinking about goals" (p. 156). Discipline becomes the key to enable us to avoid despair. With discipline and properly set goals, the humanities can be taught well and humanity, understood as both the concept of humane attitudes and mankind, has a chance (not a guarantee) to survive. Without goals and discipline, survival is hardly possible.

Professor Kaufmann's final call to arms to save the humanities involves an interdisciplinary approach to education. After attacking both the lecturing and tutoring systems, he asserts that higher education should attempt to combine good teaching with good scholarship and offer comprehensive courses that will again set the stage for a culture shock. He claims that the interdisciplinary approach involves the discipline needed in education and provided the means whereby the humanities in conjunction with other areas can provide a better understanding of the serious problems facing our society.

Such is Kaufmann's picture of our present situation and possibilities for the future. More optimistic than pessimistic, he has provided a diagnosis and a prescription for the ills of higher education in the United States. If as Kaufmann maintains "a good education depends on a clear grasp of goals and the choice of appropriate methods" (p. 185), those who find his analysis convincing should be encouraged by such vigorous proposals for educational reform.

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