

Kaufmann, W. (1973). Without Guilt and Justice: From Decido-phobia to Autonomy. New York.

What our society needs, alleges Kaufmann, is nothing short of a new morality. The traditions of old, he says, are arcane and useless, and the time has come to invent a different set of ethics. Without Guilt and Justice attempts just that.

Kaufmann's book opens, predictably enough, with a violent attack on traditional morality. The notion of justice, he argues for example, is a "decrepit idea", because "the good and evil men receive cannot be said to be deserved". The idea of guilt, he adds moreover, benefits neither the person who feels it nor mankind at large. But the worst failing of traditional morality, asserts Kaufmann, is that it has instilled in all a fear of making important decisions - what he calls "decido-phobia". In the philosophical realm, Kaufmann says for instance, traditional conceptions have led to the advent of "moral rationalism", which he argues obviates the needs for troublesome decisions by claiming "that purely rational procedures can show what one ought to do or what would constitute a just society" (p. 22).

To supplant such traditional views of morality, Kaufmann proposes an ethic of creative autonomy. Based on the virtues of love,

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courage, ambition and honesty, it is altogether unlike Kantian autonomy: there are no universal maxims or categorical imperatives. Instead, Kaufmann's new ethic focuses on that which "consists of making with open eyes the decisions that give shape to one's life" (p. 34). Autonomy, argues the author, involves high standards of intellectual honesty and integrity - the sort characteristic of a mind that is open to alternatives and questioning (Ch. 7).

Alienation and suffering, concedes Kaufmann, is the price of this new ethic. Creative autonomy, he says nevertheless, is well worth the cost:

Guilt is mired in the past, as is retributive justice. Distributive justice is struck in the present, but by the time it has figured out how to cope with that, it is dated. We must move beyond guilt and justice. We must give up the pleasant notion that we can have all good things at once. What is best is not things at all but creative autonomy (p. 236).

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