

To Be or Not to Be Autonomous

By ANATOLE BROYARD

WITHOUT GUILT AND JUSTICE. By Walter Kaufmann. 274 pages. Wyden. \$7.95.

The American way of life has been attacked so often by the champions of the counterculture that some of us are disinclined to take them seriously. There is a tendency to see these critics as simply exercising—kicking our culture around for the fun of it, like those married men who still play football on Sundays in Central Park. In fact, it would not be going too far to suggest that many counterculture writers are regarded as Sunday sociologists. This could hardly be said, however, of Princeton's influential Prof. Walter Kaufmann.

With his considerable reputation behind it, "Without Guilt and Justice" comes as a cruel blow to the body politic. The book probes even deeper into the American grain than most counterculture studies—and finds more dry rot in it. His findings, though, are often antithetical to theirs. Indeed, Professor Kaufmann's book is likely to strike liberals particularly as nothing short of heresy.

10 Strategies of 'Decidophobia'

What the author seems to be saying, among other things, is that most of us are moral cop-outs. We go to fantastic lengths to avoid "fateful decisions," a syndrome he calls "decidophobia," and he lists 10 strategies used by the decidophobe to avoid making up his own mind. Religion, for example, can provide us with a ready-made set of decisions. Drifting is another form of decidophobia, and it can be divided into "status quoism" or the aimless drifting of the dropout. Allegiance to a movement, another strategy, resembles a secularization of religion. So does allegiance to a school of thought. Exegetical thinking, a more complicated dodge, describes the habit of taking a text or an assumption as final and focusing only on how it should be interpreted. Manicheism reduces choice to two alternatives, with one so loaded that there is no real issue. Moral rationalism, according to Professor Kaufmann, is much the subtlest way to avoid decisions—and many "right-thinking people" will be outraged to discover that the author considers their position "untenable," along with its antithesis, the moral irrationalism of the Existentialists.

Pedantry, bogging down in minutiae, is another way of avoiding decisions. So is "riding the waves of the future," which is taken to be inevitable. Marriage, the professor's 10th strategy, may raise some eyebrows. Under the old, male-chauvinist

system, a wife had no mind to make up. In a liberated marriage, decision-making can be referred to a stalemating committee of two. The issues can be dropped between their twin beds.

If decidophobia is the disease, moral autonomy is the cure. In characterizing moral autonomy, Professor Kaufmann quotes Nietzsche: "A very popular error: having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one's convictions!" Perhaps the boldest part of "Without Guilt and Justice" is the book's attack on these very concepts, which the author sees as the major blocks to autonomy. Justice, not God, he says, is now our moral arbiter and to dare to oppose it is sacrilege. Professor Kaufmann feels that, when it is regarded as an absolute, the concept of justice helps blind a moral agent to the full range of his choices. Besides, to elevate justice to an absolute is part of the fallacy of moral rationalism. Law should be an instrument of social efficiency rather than an enforcement of justice, which, in the author's words, can never be just, owing to the almost infinite variables in each individual situation.

The idea of justice is held to originate in a mere promise, usually made by a parent to a child. Suspended justice—a misguided mercy of liberal parents—leads to guilt. About guilt, Professor Kaufmann asserts that it is rarely proportionate to its origin, that it is contagious and that it is quite compatible with self-congratulation and self-righteousness.

Attack on Self-Deception

Though autonomy risks alienation, it increases creativity. Being autonomous requires a sustained attack on self-deception, which may include the pursuit of happiness in the usual, comfortable sense. On the other hand, autonomy spares us that feeling of "diffuse, free-floating resentment in search of an object" that results from living uncritically. As a parting shot, Professor Kaufmann adds: "What makes people inauthentic . . . is not that they have forgotten that they must die before long. It is that they have forgotten that they are survivors."

At a time when almost everything in our lives is up for decision or revision, an unwillingness to make up our minds can be dangerously demoralizing. In an unsparing book that will probably be misunderstood by those who need it most, Professor Kaufmann has left us no place to hide, no alibis for not being and doing all the wonderful things we say we want.