

# Fritz Kaufmann (1891–1958)

Christian Lotz

In his short but brilliant “Art and Phenomenology” (1940) Kaufmann gives a comprehensive overview of the relation between phenomenology and art. He was concerned with finding a way that combines elements of EDMUND HUSSERL’s phenomenology, e.g., transcendental reduction, and elements that can only be uncovered by a hermeneutics of facticity, such as the wholeness of one’s life and existential affectivity. In his Freiburg lectures, MARTIN HEIDEGGER, as a follower of Dilthey, tried to develop a hermeneutics of life that understands all phenomena as rooted in one’s concrete historical life-project and its coherency, which is produced by care, trouble, and temporality. The duality that Kaufmann found in Freiburg explains why his original thought can be seen as an attempt to transform Husserl’s concept of intentionality into an existential category. Put briefly, Husserl conceived intentionality, which is formally indicated by the relation between *cogito* and *cogitatum* (*noēsis* and *noēma*), as the primal and a priori dimension of experience. But Husserl still conceives this relation as a *belief*. Having accepted from Heidegger that intentionality in Husserl is an empty abstraction of life, Kaufmann conceives intentionality as a relation between the factual life of a self and the historically situated world of this self, which is ultimately characterized not through a “belief,” but rather through an ontologically conceived “openness,” the form of which can be traced back to Aristotle’s *noein* (*Vernehmen*—Kaufmann 1960: 18).

The aesthetic experience, according to Kaufmann, goes back to this primal structure out of which it emerges and to which it returns. As he puts it, the

vision of art and the artist is to gain insight into the relation between “life and world” (Kaufmann 1940: 187). In contrast with Husserl’s phenomenology, Kaufmann, generally speaking, is more concerned with emotions and moods, which are indicators of the whole life situation, and they are expressed, created, and rendered visible in art. Though not explicitly stated, the intersubjective nature of art, as it comes to the fore in its connection to religion, celebration, ritual, and play, functions as the mediator and exudes the “binding power” (HANS-GEORG GADAMER in Kaufmann 1960: 400) between the poles of life and world.

The relation of life and world becomes visible in a mood “tuning us” (Kaufmann 1940: 188) in such a way that an *entire* life-experience becomes expressed in art. In this vein, the purity, depth, and greatness of art is dependent on how the artwork is able to uncover (passively) and create (actively) this wholeness. If successful, art creates an image “of things unknown” through the ideal expression of what Kaufmann calls “mood,” which is where the intentional relation between life and world becomes visible as such. A work of art “does not substitute, but institutes an original awareness of existence on the whole; it does not so much reproduce and represent as produce and present a total experience” (ibid.: 191). In this vein, Kaufmann claims that the artwork “suggests an undivided feeling of the whole of being” (ibid.). Mood or attunement (*Stimmung*) becomes a central term for Kaufmann; the “basic attunements” (*Grundstimmung*—ibid.: 129, 194) of human life display basic attitudes of and towards life as a whole, which are present in art (see ibid.: 97). Put differently, world and lifeworld as the whole of “all of our intentions” (ibid.: 388) is at stake in art. Art is, so to speak, a world concentrate; it “condenses” (*dichtet*), and invents the world as something

---

C. Lotz (✉)  
Michigan State University, Detroit, MI, USA

we live in. Since basic attunements are shared with others, and since basic moods are interconnected with basic attitudes as well as with “life and world conceptions” (Kaufmann 1960: 128), the artist can be seen as a creator of community and history, the thread of which leads Kaufmann—as heir to Hölderlin, Hegel, and Schelling—to suggest a connection between art and religion, which is the topic of “Art and Religion” (1941).

Due to a similar structure, art and religion have a relation to the absolute, which becomes expressed in a feeling of the whole that art uncovers and at the same time creates. Unfortunately, Kaufmann remains ultimately unclear about the nature of this feeling. Both art and religion remove us “from the inferences of actual life” (Kaufmann 1941: 467), although art is unable to give us any hope regarding the possibility of overcoming the “misery of life” (ibid.: 467). Whereas art glorifies life, religion transcends life, even though both forms deal with a removal from our everyday struggles and the imperfection of life. The pull toward perfection, according to Kaufmann, is based on a *fascinosum* for the perfect and beautiful, the idea of which he probably gleaned from Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige*. Besides the religious dimension, Kaufmann is also aware of the dimension of play that is present in art, leading us to the feeling of freedom and removing us from our everyday struggles. The aesthetic experience is a celebration of our being, in which “the facts of life lose their absolute weight and ultimate seriousness” (ibid.: 1941: 468). And this idea becomes very important in Gadamer’s theory of aesthetic experience presented in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960).

The religious aspect of art is visible in its communicative structure as well. As early as 1924, Kaufmann’s thought already implicitly points forward to Heidegger’s essay on art; in addition, it points back to the ideas not only of the early Hölderlin, but also of Hegel and Schelling as expressed in the so-called “Das älteste Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus” that they wrote together (see Hegel 1796). As Kaufmann points out in his essays “Das Bildwerk als ästhetisches Phänomen” and “Kunst als Feier,” art discloses possibilities of understanding our life and world within a unity that we *share* with others. Put differently, art is deeply communicative, especially since it *creates* an openness that can be shared with others in and *as* a community (Kaufmann 1960: 38), even though we might be separated in our everyday

lives. In his later essay on “Artistic Communication,” Kaufmann goes so far as to call the creation and celebration of being through art a “church service” or “mass” (*Gottesdienst*), a “eulogy” (*Lobpreisung*), and a “glorification” (ibid.: 335, 337, 311).

In addition, poetry such as Rilke’s can only be understood by its metaphysical and ontological dimension, a dimension through which things are shown as they really are (ibid.: 280). Quoting Rilke, he states that language “makes holy and celebrates” finite being (ibid.: 166). The artist becomes God-like by re-creating the world and by showing us its inner meaning in relation to life. Art repeats and celebrates the creation of the world; it revolutionizes our perception in the form of a “conversion” (ibid.: 331). The great artist and great art are, according to Kaufmann, deeply characterized by a “religious seriousness,” for and in which the *whole of our existence* is at stake. As Kaufmann points out in “Universale Representation bei Thomas Mann” (ibid.: 316), although art can never fully reach the perfection of the universe, the artist, like the philosopher, is concerned with the absolute. Indeed, as Kaufmann empathically writes, “God is enthroned on the songs of his people” (ibid.: 337), that is to say, in poetry.

The presupposition for the successful expression of an entire attitude toward the world is the suspension of and “listening to” (Kaufmann 1940: 190) life through artwork, which leads Kaufmann back to Husserl’s epochē, as well as back to Kant’s “intuition without interest.” Kaufmann primarily interprets the aesthetic attitude as an antipractical attitude and a bracketing of everyday human life: “The productive receptivity and documentary value of aesthetic experience accounts for life holding its breath and having a rest in this interval of attentive concentration” (ibid.). Kaufmann’s idea of interpreting the aesthetic attitude as an inhibition of our (everyday) life is already indicated in his early essay “Das Bildwerk als ästhetisches Phänomen.” As he puts it, aesthetic experience is characterized by an attitude that eases “the burden of reality” (*Wirklichkeitsentlastung*). To put it differently, aesthetic experience is characterized by a double structure: on the one hand, it pushes us into a direct confrontation with what shows up in art, while on the other hand, it removes us from our “usual” and normal modes of life. Our practical and theoretical lives and their interests become bracketed in such a way that the person who lives in an aesthetic

attitude becomes elevated in his/her viewpoint, which in turn allows one to view the phenomena in a “pure” way. He characterizes this attitude as a “holding open toward” (*Sich-ihm-Hinhalten*—Kaufmann 1960: 13).

Within this openness toward what is shown in the aesthetic object, the experiencing subject is able to receive what Kaufmann calls a pure “impression.” Interestingly, although he does not pursue this path any further, he characterizes the aesthetic double structure of openness and neutralization as a form of forgetting (*ibid.*: 18), which could lead to a Heideggerian analysis of the temporality included in the aesthetic shift from our everyday life into the aesthetic mode. The connection between art and philosophy, or between the phenomenological attitude and the aesthetic attitude, becomes immediately clear: both the philosopher and the aesthete can reach a point of view that has the *whole* world embodied in either philosophy or art. “The aesthetic experience,” as Kaufmann puts it, “is not bound to a single region” (*ibid.*: 19). In this way art and the correlating aesthetic experience pushes the self into a new dimension of understanding life—a dimension that is usually leveled down and suppressed in its everyday mode. Art, so to speak, makes visible what is hidden behind our everyday concerns. It allows the world to *be seen*. In other words, art holds—as philosophy does—a connection to truth and cannot be reduced to a “subjective” expression of feelings, moods, or impressions; rather, it displays the world and our life in a new perspective (though it does not change them).

Kaufmann elegantly transforms some of Heidegger’s insights into aesthetic language: art, we might say, deals with the fundamental tendencies of life in its full and empty modes of meaningfulness. Consequently, art is a form of life itself; it can be conceived as a “self-understanding of life” (*Selbstverständigung des Lebens*—Kaufmann 1960: 26), as well as a *self-realization* of life (Kaufmann 1960: 90). Life expresses *itself* in the form of “basic experiences” (*Grunderlebnisse*—*ibid.*: 91) in art, and art therefore possesses the foremost power to express, to deal with, and to *fulfill* the tendencies of factual life. Accordingly, the artist in Kaufmann’s theory receives a Nietzschean status: rather than contemplating and reflecting on life, the artist is the creator of the meaningfulness, the tendencies, and the directions (*ibid.*: 35) that life can take, as well as of its unity (*ibid.*: 37).

Creativity is the metaphysical center of the universe, and the artist is the originator of it. A similar status can be reached in religion and philosophy. This Hegelian scheme is present in all of Kaufmann’s writings, and it finds its center in his analysis of poetic and creative speech, insofar as imagination as the organ of art and philosophy needs language in order to exist.

Kaufmann’s analyses of Rilke and Thomas Mann accordingly deserve special attention, since they shift the focus of aesthetic theory to an ontological dimension that manifests itself through the poet and the artist. As we have seen, according to Kaufmann, art visibly renders the relation between life and world by means of moods and attitude, which, through the inclusion of language, leads to a superior function of art as a “world-forming power” (*weltbildend*—Kaufmann 1960: 141). Language plays an important role in this process, especially since, as Kaufmann puts it, the artist does not merely *use* a given language; instead, language becomes part of the creative process itself and as such the artist is not only the *creator* (*Bildner*) of language (*ibid.*), but consequently the *creator of a world*.

Although the scope of philosophy and phenomenology is, according to Kaufmann, is broader than that of art (especially since the former is able to cover transcendental consciousness as such), both art and philosophy are revolutionary and deeply creative in their character. Both “break through all conventions in order to realize the original meaning of being” (Kaufmann 1940: 192). Connecting it to Husserl’s conception of eidetic variation, Kaufmann claims that the artwork should be understood as an “artistic variation” (*ibid.*: 194) through which a feeling is produced that leads us to potencies of our world instead of to a rational insight into pure possibilities and conceptual schemes, as is the case in phenomenological variation. In this connection, as he points out, the phenomenological variation of essences is based on imagination (see Kaufmann 1947: 372ff.). Given that imagination is also the originary power of the artist, both philosophy and art can be traced back to the same roots, the idea of which Kaufmann finds within the German tradition of aesthetics, such as in Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and Schiller’s *Briefe zur ästhetischen Erziehung des Menschen*, as well as in the early romantics. And in a letter to Kaufmann, even Thomas Mann acknowledges the importance of this category (see Kaufmann 1943–1944: 3).

## Bibliography

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "Nachwort." In Kaufmann, *Das Reich des Schönen*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960, 397–403.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Das älteste Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus" [1796]. In his *Werke*, Vol. 1. *Frühe Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986, 234–239.
- Kaufmann, Fritz. *Das Reich des Schönen. Bausteine zu einer Philosophie der Kunst*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960 [includes a complete bibliography].
- Kaufmann, Fritz. "Art and Phenomenology." In *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*. Ed. Marvin Farber. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940, 187–202.
- Kaufmann, Fritz. "Art and Religion." In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1, 1941, 463–469.
- Kaufmann, Fritz. "The World as Will and Representation: Thomas Mann's Philosophical Novels." In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4, 1943–1944, 1–36, 287–316.
- Kaufmann, Fritz. "On Imagination." In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 7, 1947.
- Kaufmann, Fritz. [Letters (in German)]. In Edmund Husserl *Briefwechsel*. Vol. 3. *Die Göttinger Schule*. Ed. Karl Schuhmann with Elizabeth Schuhmann. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, 337–353.
- Natanson, Maurice. "Review: Thomas Mann by Fritz Kaufmann." In *Judaism* 7, 1958, 86–88.
- Oppenheim, Lois. "Fritz Kaufmann's Literary Aesthetics as Defined by His Study of Thomas Mann." In *American Phenomenology: Origins and Developments*. Ed. Eugene F. Kaelin and Calvin O. Schrag. *Analecta Husserliana* 26. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, 31–42.
- Rudnick, Fritz. "Fritz Kaufmann's Aesthetics." In *American Phenomenology: Origins and Developments*. Ed. Eugene F. Kaelin and Calvin O. Schrag. *Analecta Husserliana* 26. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, 17–30.
- Skarda, Christine, and Fred Kersten. "Fritz Leopold Kaufmann." In *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*. Ed. Lester Embree et al. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997, 385–387.