



Caltech Revisited

Eleven years ago, Abraham Kaplan, a distinguished professor of philosophy from the University of Michigan, spent several days at Caltech as a guest of the Caltech Y. At the end of his visit he was interviewed by John Weir, associate professor of psychology, about his impressions of Caltech and its students. E&S published an excerpt from that interview in its June 1967 issue.

At that time Kaplan found Caltech students intellectually mature though emotionally hungry for human warmth. He saw the campus atmosphere as austere, with inadequate interaction between faculty and students. He admired the diversity of backgrounds of the students but pointed out that they shared a dedication to the life of the mind, with labora-

tories being much more important than libraries. Admitting undergraduate girls would, he felt, contribute greatly to campus life. He also hoped that—in the interests of variation from the campus norm—the expanding social sciences would not go in a “hard,” or heavily mathematical, direction.

Last fall Kaplan, who has been professor of philosophy at Haifa University in Israel since 1972, returned to Caltech for two terms as Mellon Visiting Professor of Philosophy. His teaching assignment during that period was two sections of PL 102: “Philosophy in the Old Testament” and “Asian Philosophies” first term; and “Post Biblical Jewish Thought: Hillel to Buber” and “The Logic of Social Values: Philosophic Issues in Public and Private Morality” second term.

At the end of this visit Jacquelyn Bonner asked him some of the same questions Weir had asked him in 1967 about his impressions of Caltech and its students. Here is an excerpt from that interview.

JB: Let's begin with the same question John Weir began with. How would you characterize the general nature of the student body at Caltech?

AK: First, I have to say that, paradoxically, I got to know the student body less in those two quarters than I did in those few days 11 years ago. I was probably exposed to many more students then; everything was arranged for a visitor to speak to many student groups. This year, as a member of the faculty, essentially I spoke only to the

students in my classes, and they were very small classes.

It struck me that the students are considerably younger than they used to be. That's understandable, of course, but I think something more is involved than the obvious change in my perspective. In the interim, I have been teaching in Israel; my students there, because of compulsory military service, are two or three years older. At that age three years is an important interval.

I found my students here much more naive in the area of philosophy than I anticipated, but I want to make explicit that teaching them was a great joy. They came close to a teacher's dream of an ideal student—somebody who knows nothing and understands everything. Too often, especially among undergraduates, what we get is the opposite—students who know everything and understand nothing.

I regret that I had less to do with them than I've ever had with any students. They came to class and turned in their work, but I hardly ever saw them outside the class. If they came to my office, it was for a very specific matter—their term paper perhaps—and that was all I saw of them. One factor to which I attribute this is that what I was doing was on the periphery of their concerns. Since they were heavily occupied in other directions, it was a considerable investment of their time and energies to allow themselves even this much work with me.

With hindsight, I see some steps that might have been taken to overcome that difficulty. I did have students in my home once or twice, and I would have done so several more times had I lived anywhere near the university. Unfortunately, because I was unable to find housing in Pasadena, I lived a 40-minute freeway drive away, so I could be on campus only for the two days a week that I taught, and students could not easily visit me.

In this connection, I think universities in general don't sufficiently recognize that a university is a community

of learners, but it makes no sense to speak of a community of any kind unless it has a geographic base. That means that helping find nearby housing is not just a fringe benefit to a faculty member, especially a visiting faculty member, but is really essential to the important work of the university.

I did take some steps on my own to be a part of the Pasadena community. I lectured to the local Jewish temple and at the Pasadena City College, and I offered my services to the campus Hillel. I spoke at a political science colloquium and for a humanities seminar, to a ladies' club at the Athenaeum, and for the campus Y, but I wish I had been taken advantage of more.

JB: How do you feel about the atmosphere on the campus and the attitudes of students?

AK: I'm going to put my answer in a comparative way. Higher education in Israel is very professionally oriented because the Israeli students can't afford a "liberal" education in the sense of an opportunity for personal growth. It struck me that Caltech is like an Israeli university in that respect. It does not seem to be a place where people are growing in all sorts of directions—intellectually, culturally, personally—but rather where people are pursuing very definite career lines.

The kind of thing I like to see in a university, certainly among undergraduates, is that somebody has suddenly discovered, say, Chinese art or Greek poetry and is excited about it. I did not have very much sense of that at Caltech. Witness the sort of things you see in the bookstore. There are lots of very fine books in physics, mathematics, and astronomy for sale, and those are marvelous and exciting fields. But there wasn't much of Greek poetry or Chinese art, so to speak.

Now, to say the students were just going through their courses to get a BS would no doubt do them an injustice.

Rather, they were getting through their courses to master astronomy or physics or chemistry. I think there was a very healthy orientation to what they were doing, but what they were doing was more narrowly defined than might be optimum.

One thing that did strike me was a gratifying amount of creativity, and I am referring to creativity as something distinct from intelligence. In my students' papers there were qualities of originality, imagination, and playfulness that I very much cherish. I don't expect, in a class of ten or so, to have five or six papers that show those qualities. Of course, I expected the students to be bright, but it was an unexpected joy to find them looking at things in a different way, giving themselves the freedom to write a little verse or making a drawing and obviously enjoying it.

JB: Do you feel we are educating for such creativity?

AK: It's hard to say, except that what I noted was in their work rather than in other sorts of areas where it might be more likely. I am not talking about wearing weird clothing. But it would be surprising to find creativity limited to just one area; you more commonly expect it to spill over. Somebody who allows himself to think imaginatively about a subject matter may also be thinking imaginatively about what he would like to eat or how he would like to spend his leisure time. Caltech is still very square in some ways, but I want not to be misunderstood about that. In the sixties a lot of people who thought of themselves as rebels were very square indeed; they were just conforming to a different norm, and I'm glad we're out of that—though I wouldn't suggest a return to the stereotype of the engineer.

JB: You were surprised 11 years ago at our attrition rate. It is still about the same—over a period of four years,

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about a third of a class will drop out for various reasons. Eventually, some of them will come back and finish, of course. Do you have any comments?

AK: I want to presume to express an opinion on an educational policy. I can very well understand that every university would like for its places to be occupied, as far as possible, by students who are progressing at a reasonable tempo toward some academic goal. But I believe it is not a proper function of a university, and certainly not of its faculty, to become disciplinarians of the personal habits and manners of the students, even with regard to learning.

It has always been my policy in some 35 years of teaching to allow students to turn in work whenever they have completed it, without any penalty because they did it at one date rather than another. To my dismay, I found that Caltech does not allow students to take incompletes and turn in their work after the close of the term. It would be more reasonable to require work to be completed within, say, six months of the end of a course, or by the end of the next term, or some such period. That means that we allow students some freedom to organize their own time.

I especially responded to this situation because the students who were taking my courses were taking something that was not central; whenever there was a conflict, they obviously had to devote themselves to the courses more important to their own educational objectives. As a result I had several students in each term withdraw in the last weeks. They simply could not plan to finish their work on time, and no other opportunities were being given. I fail to see that any good educational purposes were being served. A student who might have been able to learn and grow by making use of vacation time, or of other times when things weren't so pressing, is denied that opportunity when we say

you must do your work at the time we say and not at the time you find most suitable for your learning. This may well be connected with the notion that discipline is good for the character. I don't want students to hang around who are just dilettantes, but I cannot believe that the only alternative is "hup, two, three."

JB: As a faculty member you would like to have the privilege of deciding who is a dilettante?

AK: Only of deciding when work can be completed, without having to go through rules and petitions, as though this were such a radical procedure as someone being asked to lend money without security.

JB: The expansion of the social sciences that you discussed 11 years ago has, as you know, taken place. What is your impression?

AK: I wouldn't presume to judge how it is working, but I do have the feeling that the "hard" approaches are still very much in the saddle. They are perfectly respectable and have a great deal to contribute, but I think they could do much more in another setting. To do it here is more of the same, and it misses out on a very important kind of contribution that could be made.

JB: That brings up the historical dichotomy between those who feel the humanities and social sciences at Caltech should stand on their own academically, and those who think of the division as basically to provide a service. Do you have an opinion on that?

AK: On that I have strong feelings. I do not believe that any department or division can flourish if it is only a service department. I couldn't really teach philosophy if it was only a service course, and the image of being somewhere where I would always be out on the fringe would be wholly in-

tolerable to me, as I think it would be to anyone who was seriously concerned with his own field.

I don't think that issue should be confounded with that other issue of "hard" and "soft." If anything, I would say that the hardness at Caltech is a capitulation to the role of service. It says, "Let's talk to them in their lingo and do the kinds of things they do, because that's the kind of thing they understand best."

In a larger university I have always been in favor of balance as among these different kinds of approaches. If we can do only one, if the program can't be comprehensive and balanced, then a great deal depends upon the kind of university it is. When everything else around is hard, then I think it should be soft. Caltech is small enough that it really can't look to very great breadth. For instance, in a large enough philosophy department you would have Marxist, medieval Jewish and Arabic thought, and symbolic logic, but in a place like Caltech I wouldn't get into logic and set theory. There are plenty of places in mathematics where they can come as close to that as they need to. But I would do aesthetics and oriental philosophy because I don't know where else they can do that, and I would do it in a very serious way and not just as a gentleman's course.

JB: Dr. Kaplan, we've been talking for an hour, and I want to thank you very much for giving me that time.

AK: I appreciate your giving me this opportunity to look at my experiences and to give expression to some of my feelings. It strikes me that this is a minimum way of making better use of visitors. Perhaps it would be in the interest of the university in this period of transition to speak more with visitors about what they see in the educational scene. In any case, it is always nice to have people ask your opinion. Thank you. □