

Existential Ironies and the Dictates of Bureaucracy: A Study of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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In the literary lineages of Europe in the twentieth century, Franz Kafka has been acknowledged as the representative writer of existential thought. Kafka was not only aware of the long tradition of the philosophy, which examined the core concerns of human existence; rather he was well versed with the philosophical writings in this regard when he had embarked on writing. In his essay "Franz Kafka and Existentialism", Jay Ciaccio refers to Kafka's familiarity with Kierkegaard, who had philosophically articulated the issues of existentialism far earlier than the twentieth century existentialist philosophers, as follows: "Kafka had read Kierkegaard, identified with his ideas, and incorporated them in his work..." (Ciaccio, 77) Viewed from diverse perspectives, Kafka emerges as an existentialist writer who sought to give literary expression to the existentialist questions relating to guilt, freedom, absurdity, among others. More often than not, Kafka has hence also been studied in a comparative framework placing him vis-à-vis Dostoyevsky, Albert Camus, and Samuel Beckett. Jay Ciaccio remarks about Kafka: "However, no author has portrayed existentialism as clearly and creatively as Franz Kafka...A great many of his stories revolve around man's existence and its meaning, or lack thereof, and his characters endure punishment without ever understanding the nature of their guilt..." (Ciaccio, 77) Kafka's long story "The Metamorphosis" portrays many strains of the existential anguish and irony. Identifying this story as an epitomic representation of the existential literature, Ciaccio underlines: "Perhaps no other story so clearly displays Kafka as an existentialist writer than "The Metamorphosis"." (Ciaccio, 77)

The idea of absurdity constitutes one among many notions which the existential thought is based upon. Kierkegaard attempted to use the idea of absurdity philosophically and at many places in his narratives, Kafka undertakes to represent the absurdity which surrounds and confounds the reality of human life. Jay Ciaccio comments: "Kierkegaard frequently asserted his belief in the absurdity of the world, and

Kafka employed this notion in his art. The concept of absurdity is one of the elements which seems to unify all his works, and is indeed the most recognizable aspect of his style.” (Ciaccio, 77) The notion of absurdity has been well articulated by Kafka in his story “The Metamorphosis”. Jay Ciaccio points out: “The absurdity of “The Metamorphosis” is what first grabs the reader’s attention. “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect.” (Kafka 854) Within the first sentence of the story Kafka has transported us to the world of the absurd. All that is familiar and known to us is discarded, and a dream logic now prevails.” (Ciaccio, 77)

A dream-like consciousness of reality underscores the idea of absurdity. Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of *The Metamorphosis*, has suddenly changed into a huge insect and like any other human being he resists believing this transformation. The dream-like element in this transformation baffles him, for he does not want to accept it. It appears even ‘non-sense’ to him to find himself so totally changed. He tells himself: “How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense...” (Kafka, 16) He asks himself: “What’s happened to me?...It wasn’t a dream.” (Kafka, 15) Even though awareness lingers in him not to believe this dream-like reality, he has no escape from it and he is consigned to accept this non-sense, this dream thwarting all rational notions about the reality. Along with this incredible transformation comes a conflict of perceptions about the self. He finds himself lying hapless as an insect in the bed, but the urgency of catching the early morning train to his firm has held him in grip. The animal existence and the human existence merge into his confused consciousness of the self. He thinks: “First of all though, I’ve got to get up, my train leaves at five.” (Kafka, 17) The strenuous effort to arrange the strain emerging from the baffled state of his being, when he swings between the animal existence of an insect struggling hard to get down from his bed and the human state of being conscious about reporting punctually at his firm, characterizes the absurdity which stares Gregor Samsa in his face. The confusion and perplexity has been transported to the level of his consciousness of time also. He used to get up in time daily hearing the loud sound of the alarm-clock. When he looks at the alarm-clock, which shows that it was half-past six, the sense of confusion, perplexity and doubt overpowers him all of a sudden. He is at a loss to state categorically to himself whether he could really have overheard the loud sound of the alarm-clock. His predicament, however, lies also in his inability to be sure about the soundness of the sleep and he seeks to attribute his being late in waking up to this non-ordinary inability. Kafka writes about Gregor Samsa’s perplexed and absurd condition: “It was half-past six and the hands were quietly moving forward, it was even later than half past six, more like quarter to

seven. Had the alarm clock not rung? He could see from the bed that it had been set for four o'clock as it should have been; it certainly must have rung. Yes, but was it possible to quietly sleep through that furniture-rattling noise? True, he had not slept peacefully, but probably all the more deeply because of that?" (Kafka, 18) Being forced to see the complex and confounding interrelation between the 'apparent' and the 'actual' reality underlines the absurd in the story.

The pain about the sorrowful state of the self, which is entangled in the disassociation between the 'real' and the 'doubt on the real', highlights the anguish of an absurd existence, which Gregor Samsa is exposed to suddenly. While he is yet in the bed and planning to get down, his mother comes to him and reminds him of catching the morning-train. He answers to his mother, but doing so he is terrified to hear his own voice, which sounds somehow unfamiliar to him. Thus, the flux-like consciousness takes him in its stride and he yields to it. Kafka describes this situation: "'Gregor," somebody called-it was his mother-"it's quarter to seven. Didn't you want to go somewhere?" That gentle voice! Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could hardly be recognized as the voice he had had before. As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it, the words could be made out at first but then there was a sort of echo which made them unclear, leaving the hearer unsure whether he had heard properly or not." (Kafka, 19) The fleeting line of demarcation between the 'appearance' and 'reality' so deeply jolts Gregor Samsa that the idea of restoring the apparent illusory sensibilities to reality constantly crosses through his mind. Sensing the appearance to be illusory and trying to be able to restore it to normalcy constitutes yet another dimension of the absurd in this story. Explicating the situation of Gregor Samsa in such a quagmire, Kafka writes: "At times like this he would direct his eyes to the window and look out as clearly as he could, but unfortunately, even the other side of the narrow street was enveloped in morning fog and the view had little confidence or cheer to offer him. "Seven o'clock, already," he said to himself when the clock struck again, "seven o'clock, and there's still a fog like this." And he lay there quietly a while longer, breathing lightly as if he perhaps expected the total stillness to bring things back to their real and natural state." (Kafka, 23)

Through this story Kafka has also tried to uncover the insensitiveness of the bureaucratic machinery, which always seeks to ignore the truthfulness behind the painful human existence. Kafka describes how the delay in catching the morning train led to the arrival of the chief clerk to the house of Gregor Samsa.

While Gregor was still trying his hard to move himself in his bed and get down from his bed, his sister comes close to his door to inform him that the chief clerk had come to meet him only. Kafka describes, from the right-hand room his sister was whispering to inform him of the situation: “Gregor, the chief clerk is here.”(Kafka, 25-26) Not only is his sister, his father also worried to see the clerk who had come to know about the delay in the departure of Gregor. His father approaches from the other side to his room to intimate him about the inquiring clerk. Kafka describes: ““Gregor,” said his father now from the left-hand room, “the chief clerk has come round and wants to know why you didn’t leave on the early train.” (Kafka, 26) Sudden, though purposed arrival of a bureaucratic-superior to his house unsettles the family-members of Gregor and they come out with the excuses concerning the delay in the departure of Gregor to his office that day. Both, mother and father of Gregor plead before the chief clerk that Gregor has not been well. In the words of Kafka: ““He isn’t well,” said his mother to the chief clerk,, while his father continued to speakthrough the door. “He isn’t well, please believe me. Why else would Gregor have missed a train! The ladonly ever thinks about the business.” (Kafka, 26) Gregor’s sister grows sad and skeptic about the future of the financial stability of the family as a fall-out of the event. She starts crying in her room, which can be heard by Gregor. Gregor reflects on her crying: “And why was she crying? Was it because he had not got up, and had not let the chief clerk in, because he was in danger of losing his job, and if that happened his boss would once more pursue their parents with the same demands as before?” (Kafka, 27)

In a bureaucratic-machinery, which is based on the division and stratification of positions, one person is always at the receiving end. In this story, Kafka has described how Gregor stands at the receiving end. The chief clerk dictates the terms and asserts that slight inconveniences must not obstruct the professional goals of the official duties. The fact that Gregor is not well does not concern him at core and he constantly reminds Gregor of the official tasks and assignments awaiting disposal in the firm. He does not want to take Gregor’s inability to catch the early train seriously. He tells Gregor’s mother indifferently: “Well I can’t think of any other way of explaining it, Mrs. Samsa...I hope it’s nothing serious. But on the other hand, I must say that we people in commerce ever become slightly unwell then, fortunately or unfortunately as you like, we simply have to overcome it because of business considerations.” (Kafka, 27) Behind these words lurks the sheer insistence on the sanctity of bureaucratic rules governing the terms of employment in the firm and the same is brought to the notice of Gregor when the clerk turns to Gregor in conversation. Kafka describes how the clerk addresses to

Gregor: ““Mr. Samsa,” the chief clerk called now in a lower voice, “what is wrong? You barricade yourself in your room, give us no more than yes or no for an answer...and...you fail to carry out your business duties in a way that is quite unheard of.” (Kafka, 28) So, Gregor’s real inability to go office that day is an illustration of ‘neglecting business duties’ in the eyes of the clerk, as is so common a practice in a bureaucratic set-up which is not only based on inequality, rather also on the very legitimation of that inequality. The chief-clerk continues his conversation to Gregor and he wants an explanation from Gregor for his inability to go office: “I’m speaking here on behalf of your parents and of your employer, and really must request a clear and immediate and explanation...This morning, your employer did suggest a possible reason for your failure to appear, it’s true-it had to do with the money that was recently entrusted to you-but I came near to giving him my word of honor that that could not be the right explanation. But now that I see your incomprehensible stubbornness I no longer feel any wish whatsoever to intercede on your behalf. And nor is your position all that secure...Your turnover has been very unsatisfactory of late.” (Kafka, 29) Precisely because Gregor’s family is laden with debt, the clerk has liked to associate his absence from office with the cash-payments entrusted to Gregor. A doubt financial in nature has been cast on Gregor with reference to the indebtedness of his family. Through this story, Kafka reveals how bureaucracy turns blind eye to the misery of the people expecting nothing other than unswerving professional commitment to the duties of the office.

The existential analysis of this story would entail a study of the reflection of Kafka on the issue of alienation through the narrative centering on Gregor Samsa. Charles I. Glicksberg stated about the interrelation between existentialism and the theme of alienation: “Existentialism expresses the alienation of modern man, his spiritually orphaned state, his incapacity to make any viable affirmations.” (Glicksberg, 233) In *The Metamorphosis*, the transformation of Gregor into an insect is not only indicative of the inability of Gregor to humanly bear the pains and suffering of human existence, rather it also marks the beginning of a yawning gap between him and other human beings around him, as his existence means now an animal existence. This moment is the inauguration of the wretchedness of the alienation which slowly separates him from the others, even from his own family members. When Gregor unlocks his door and appears before his family members and the chief-clerk who has come to inquire about his delay, all are shocked to see him struggling as an insect on the floor. Gregor pleads to the chief-clerk, invoking him to empathize with his condemned condition: “Please, don’t go away, at least first say something to show that you grant that I’m at least partly right.” (Kafka, 36) The possibility

of empathizing with Gregor gradually dwindles with all. The chief-clerk separates himself from Gregor and leaves the room to get out of the house where Gregor lives. Kafka describes: "But the chief clerk had turned away as soon as Gregor had started to speak, and with protruding lips, only stared back at him over his trembling shoulders as he left." (Kafka, 36)

No one else than Gregor understands that it is the accumulated anxieties, pains and complaints over the years which has incapacitated him to exist as the human being and even though he can think and speak, he must come to terms with the transformation which has occurred unbelievably to him. Putting across his opinion about his sorrowful state to the chief-clerk, he says: "And you're also well aware that we travellers spend almost the whole year away from the office, so that we can very easily fall victim to gossip and chance and groundless complaints, and it's almost impossible to defend yourself from that sort of thing, or if at all it's when we arrive back home exhausted from a trip, and that's when we feel the harmful effects of what's been going on without even knowing what caused them." (Kafka, 36) Gregor's transformation entailed that he could not be understood by his words. His attempt to communicate fails, his sister wonders at his voice and she implores her mother to send for the doctor. Kafka narrates "'Mother?' his sister called from the other side..." You'll have to go for the doctor straight away. Gregor is ill...Did you hear the way Gregor spoke just now?" (Kafka, 31) And in an indifferent gesture, as if Gregor is none to him anymore, the chief-clerk confirmed: "That was the voice of an animal..." (Kafka, 31).

The pangs of alienation became all the more clear to Gregor, when he realized the melting away of the emotional affection of his father towards him. His father was panicked the way the chief-clerk had swiftly left the house. His father thumped his feet and drove Gregor back to his room. Kafka depicts this growing distance between Gregor and his father: "The flight of the chief clerk seemed, unfortunately, to put Gregor's father into a panic as well. Until then he had been relatively self controlled, but now, instead of running after the chief clerk himself, or at least not impeding Gregor as he ran after him, Gregor's father seized the chief clerk's stick in his right hand,...picked up a large newspaper from the table with his left, and used them to drive Gregor back into his room, stamping his foot at him as he went. Gregor's appeals to his father were of no help, his appeals were simply not understood, however much he humbly turned his head his father merely stamped his foot all the harder." (Kafka, 39) At this point of time, Gregor became fully cognizant of the total alienation from his family members and others

around him. He reflected: “The previous morning while the doors were locked everyone had wanted to get in there to him, but now, now that he had opened up one of the doors and the other had clearly been unlocked sometime during the day, no-one came, and the keys were in the other sides.” (Kafka, 44)

The idea of freedom is closely related to the existential consciousness. Jay Ciaccio comments: “For a man to truly exist, as Sartre believed, he must assert his freedom.” (Ciaccio, 78) In the story *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa is led to live a sense of freedom out of love for the other. Otherwise confined to his room as an insect, he inches towards the living room exercising big effort just to see his sister Grete playing violin. Music draws him out from the dinginess of darkness, but more so his intense desire to see his sister playing on the notes of violin. Kafka describes: “His sister began to play; father and mother paid close attention, one on each side, to the movements of her hand. Drawn in by the playing, Gregor had dared to come forward a little and already had his head in the living room.” (Kafka, 83) Quite often, the confines of his room pressed hard against Gregor’s conception of free space devoid of choking limitations. He would prefer shifting his chair close to window and look out into the open from the window, and thus gain a sense of freedom. Kafka narrates: “He would often lie there the whole night through, not sleeping a wink but scratching at the leather for hours on end. Or he might go to all the effort of pushing a chair to the window, climbing up onto the sill and, popped up in the chair, leaning on the window to stare out of it. He had used to feel a great sense of freedom from doing this...” (Kafka, 54) Some critics, for example Jay Ciaccio, have argued that in this story, Gregor also tries to come into the way of the freedom of others. Jay Ciaccio argues: “In Gregor Samsa we see a man whose mere notion of freedom is utterly distorted. He not only misconstrues his own freedom, but that of others, as can be seen in his desire to possess his sister: “He would never let her out of his room, at least, not so long as he lived...” (Ciaccio, 78) But one must not lose sight of Gregor’s desire to let the capabilities of his sister fully blossoming. In possessing such a desire, he retains within himself a sense of responsibility to ensure free development of the potentials to his sister. A person aware of such responsibility must also know the worth of freedom. Kafka writes about Gregor who wanted Grete to visit conservatory: “He never wanted to let her out of his room...She would sit beside him on the couch with her ear bent down to him while he told her how he had always intended to send her to the conservatory.” (Kafka, 85)

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